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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF BUNYAN AND WORDSWORTH

by



SHANNON MURRAY

A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Spiritual Autobiographies of Bunyan and Wordsworth, submitted by Shannon Murray in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date.....*October 10, 1984*.....





## Abstract

John Bunyan and William Wordsworth both wrote accounts of their young spiritual lives, Bunyan of his road to salvation, and Wordsworth of the growth of his poetic talents. Different as the autobiographies of a Puritan preacher and a romantic poet would seem at first glance, there are remarkable similarities: both believed themselves the recipients of freely given gifts, both saw their lives leading towards and away from moments of spiritual enlightenment, and both sprinkled their works with ordinary experiences bathed in an extraordinary light. These similarities, as well as the intention to express ideas or experience in simple language, suggest that Wordsworth and Bunyan shared to a great extent a way of looking at human life.



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## Introduction

There are two types of autobiography, the "res gestae" and the spiritual autobiography. The former, examples of which include Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography and Rousseau's Confessions, deals with events, the visible and verifiable facts of one's existence; the author wishes to show how he has arrived at the place where he now stands. The spiritual autobiography, on the other hand, is the author's attempt to show how he has become the person he is. The tone here is the analytical and often involves painful self-scrutiny in the quest for an answer to which that life has been leading, an answer with universal as well as personal significance. The spiritual autobiography, more than the "res gestae," is concerned with the meaning of a life. The two forms, then, deal with an essential human dichotomy, the division between one's internal and external existence.

It is usual that there be some intersection of these two planes, both in the "res gestae" and in the spiritual autobiography. The former, for instance, may offer some explanation or analysis of events. The spiritual autobiography, while primarily concerned with the general or repeated kind of events which serve to shape a personality, may elaborate



upon specific incidents in order to provide the work with variety and a loose chronological structure.

The "res gestae" has been a popular form with those civilisations, social movements and occupations which stress man's position within society; the ancient Greeks and Romans, the rational thinkers of the eighteenth century, and politicians of any time in history are the major practitioners. The spiritual autobiography proves more useful to Christians. Saint Augustine's Confessions, A.D. 397-8, is the first modern example of the form, and the one which became the model for later Christian autobiographers. Augustine himself had models for such an account from the advent of Christianity, in the conversion story of Saint Paul, and ultimately in the life of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The suitability of the spiritual autobiography for Christianity is a result of a basic Christian attitude towards this life; rather than working for transient worldly goals, Christians are asked to struggle against both the concerns and the pleasures of this life, and to seek instead spiritual rewards, especially the assurance of salvation and of a place in the kingdom of heaven. Man's spiritual existence, the workings of his mind and the progress of his soul, is his only link with the world to come, and so its movement is his prime concern.

With the rise in the seventeenth century of Puritanism, the spiritual autobiography took on an even greater significance; it was now more than ever necessary that the Christian search





his mind for evidence of God's grace in order to determine whether he were elect or reprobate. Religious leaders encouraged their flock to keep spiritual journals, and eighty of these journals were published by the Quakers alone over a period of sixty years.<sup>2</sup> Most of these followed a standard pattern with few deviations, but some, working within that pattern, were able to create lively works of lasting importance. John Bunyan's Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, first published in 1666, is the Puritan spiritual autobiography most often still read in the twentieth century. Its survival is no doubt in part a result of the popularity of The Pilgrim's Progress. It does, however, exhibit much of the narrative power of Bunyan's later works, and for that reason it deserves consideration with the better examples of the genre, such as that of Anna Trapnel, George Fox, and Richard Baxter.<sup>3</sup> Grace Abounding is, then, both a product of a remarkably strong literary trend in the seventeenth century and a unique literary accomplishment.

William Wordsworth's The Prelude, a poet's spiritual autobiography, shares with Bunyan's account elements of focus, attitude and style. Some of these are common to all or most Puritan autobiographies, some are unique to Bunyan. The most important of these may be divided into four sections, those elements which concern election, those which concern conversion, the treatment of specific experience within the framework of spiritual analysis, and the intentionally simple diction.



Despite the apparent disparity between the poet and the preacher of two different centuries, explanations for the possibility of such a comparison have been suggested. T.E. Hulme described Romanticism as an attempt to recapture the belief held during the Restoration in life's meaning, a belief which had weakened during the Enlightenment. Hulme felt the attempt misguided:

The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in a God, so you begin to believe man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism. The concepts that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. 4

Despite his obvious preference for Classicism, Hulme is, I believe, on the right track. M.H. Abrams is more tolerant. His term for the same phenomenon is "natural supernaturalism". The tendency was, he wrote, "in diverse degrees to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine."<sup>5</sup> in other words, the framework which supported religion in the seventeenth century was adopted, but applied to secular concerns. Experiences, nature, inanimate objects and random thoughts, which were no longer granted significance as carefully placed evidence of a controlling and ordering power in human life during the eighteenth century, regained their importance with the rise of romanticism, but the Christian God was no longer firmly at the centre of the framework. The comforting order was restored but without the restricting Puritan theological





doctrines.

The establishment of this relationship between Puritan and Romantic has given rise to many more particular comparisons within those two movements, and Wordsworth and Bunyan have been linked more than once. In Versions of the Self, John Morris' insightful look at the development of autobiography from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Bunyan and Wordsworth are given their places at opposite ends of the progression.<sup>6</sup> J. Crofts points to the Anglican tone which pervades much of Wordsworth's poetry and notes that an even greater resemblance in tone is evident in the Puritan spiritual autobiography.<sup>7</sup> The most detailed comparison has been done by Vincent Newey, but although he raises some useful points, he far from exhausts the subject; the two autobiographies are considered only briefly.<sup>8</sup> There remains, therefore, much fruitful work to be done on the subject which not only should establish the strength of the comparison, but also should advance the understanding of these two individual artists.

I recognise that there are dangers in such a comparison. This paper will not, for instance, attempt to prove that Wordsworth was directly influenced by Bunyan's autobiography. What will become apparent is a kind of spiritual kinship, a distant familial relationship born of similar concerns. It is also not the intention of this paper to deny the obvious gulf which does exist between the two men and their works. Indeed, the similarities are so much more striking against



the more immediately apparent differences. The first two chapters will deal with the affinity between the two men in the way they see themselves and the pattern of their own lives. The third will look at the way individual experiences are made to leap out of the otherwise internal narrative, and the last will deal with the simple style to which both aspire.



## Chapter One: ELECTION

"Election" is a term deeply rooted in Puritan vocabulary, but may seem inappropriate when applied to a work of Romantic poetry. In its general sense, however, it indicates that one has been selected, chosen either at random or for merit from among the rest of humanity, in order to fulfil a particular task. Bunyan is "elect" in the strict theological sense of the word; God has chosen him as one of those who will enjoy the kingdom of heaven. Wordsworth's "election" has more to do with his poetic ability than with salvation, but there is still the idea in The Prelude that that gift is a kind of holy trust, bestowed upon him by a superior power. His "election," then, is a clear example of a Romantic adopting the framework of a theological doctrine in a secular pursuit, a pursuit which in that framework gains almost divine importance.

The very fact that both Bunyan and Wordsworth chose to write accounts of their own lives suggests that they detected something extraordinary therein, something which deserved reporting. The best way in which to begin this entire comparison, then, is to explore the purposes for which these two autobiographies were written. The answers





are more valuable and more easily deduced in autobiography than in any other genre. An author will often go so far as to state his intentions outright. In this most self-conscious of literary enterprises one may feel the need to defend against charges of self-indulgence or arrogance, and therefore an explanation, both for why the author wishes to write the work in the first place and for why anyone would want to read it, is often offered. Both Bunyan and Wordsworth make their intentions clear at points, but in both cases these intentions are more complex than they would seem at first glance; there are in Grace Abounding and in The Prelude three distinct reasons which come into play, one is didactic, one is self-renovating, and the last is self-defending.

The first motive Bunyan states, and the one which to him seems the most important, is the didactic. In his "Preface" he mentions that he has been removed from the presence of his "children," the members of his church, and can no longer tend to the "further edifying and building up in Faith" of their souls (p.1). The autobiography will allow him to continue his influence in absentia, and will therefore perform the same function as the epistles of Saint Paul. Bunyan was certainly well acquainted with the writings of Paul and the epistles are often quoted throughout the work; Rebecca S. Beal has noted that the title of Bunyan's autobiography is in fact a paraphrase of a line from the first letter of Paul to Timothy.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of elements of epistolary form throughout



Grace Abounding: it is addressed to a specific group of people, it includes a salutation in the "Preface" and a farewell in the "Conclusion," and there are references made to the task of letter writing, as are often included at the beginning of a letter. Grace Abounding is not the only document written while Bunyan was in prison and it is not the only one written as an epistle. "A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan," included with the Oxford edition of Grace Abounding, is certainly epistolary, as Roger Sharrock suggests: "These [reports] must have been written in prison immediately after the events, and probably in the form of a pastoral letter to console and fortify the Bedford congregation."<sup>2</sup> What distinguishes the accounts in Grace Abounding from these other letters is that in the autobiography events and thoughts are recalled from the more distant past, and are recalled not merely to console, but to instruct the congregation. Advice is presented in the form of biographical examples, and it is this point which makes the work distinctly Pauline. Even more than an autobiography, Grace Abounding takes the form of a long autobiographical epistle.

Saint Paul's influence may be expected in Bunyan's writing, but it is more surprising that The Prelude can be seen in that same epistolary form, without direct Pauline influence. The formalities of letter writing are apparent here as well; Wordsworth includes a salutation, a farewell, and he apologizes at the beginning of Book III for having



neglected to write for so long, a common note in letters. His intended audience is even more specific than Bunyan's; The Prelude is clearly addressed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the second person address appears frequently throughout the course of the poem. Once again, the author would advise the party to whom the poem is addressed, and again the advice is conveyed through autobiographical examples rather than through direct counsel.

The nature of the advice in the two autobiographies is quite varied. Bunyan explains what he wishes his flock to learn in the two passages from the "Preface":

Wherefore this I have endeavoured to do; and not onely so, but to publish it also; that, if God will, others may be put in remembrance of what he hath done for their Souls, by reading his work upon me. 3

And later:

My dear Children, call to mind the former days, the years of ancient times; remember also your songs in the night and commune with your own heart, Psal. 77,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12. Yea, look diligently, and leave no corner therein unsearched, for there is treasure hid, even the treasure of your first and second experience of the grace of God towards you.

( p.3 )

His "children" will first learn the ways in which God's influence may manifest itself in the life of a Christian, and they will then be prepared to seek that influence in their own lives. They learn from Bunyan's model how to privately







construct their own spiritual autobiographies, an exercise which not only will strengthen their own faith and conviction of salvation, but also will add to the praise and glory of God.

There are two groups which Wordsworth hopes to affect with his poetic autobiography; as he mentions in Book X, his greatest fear is that he will be unable to fulfil his task and will be "to men / Useless, and even, beloved Friend! a soul / To thee unknown."<sup>4</sup> As a poet, then, his goal is to serve mankind, but in The Prelude Coleridge will be the main beneficiary of his guidance. This is fitting: Bunyan writes of his trials and triumphs as a struggling Christian to other struggling Christians, those who can identify with and benefit from his experiences, and Wordsworth writes of his growth as a poet to another poet. For Coleridge, no explanation or defence for the work will be necessary; "To thee," Wordsworth writes, "the work shall justify itself" (XIV, 414). Just as the people of Bedford will learn how to search for evidence of their own election by reading Grace Abounding, Coleridge will learn from The Prelude how another poet has sought evidence of the same gift he desires, the gift of poetic ability. Both autobiographies, then, are written by the elect for those who may also be elect.

Bunyan and Wordsworth did not write the accounts of their lives solely for the benefit of others, however; both seek a kind of spiritual renewal which will proceed from the



act of recalling past experiences. In the "Preface" to Grace Abounding, Bunyan suggests he has already profited from that which he offers his "children":

I have sent you here enclosed a drop of that honey, that I have taken out of the Carcase of a Lyon (Judg. 14.5,6,7,8). I have eaten thereof my self also, and am much refreshed thereby.

Bunyan will become "refreshed" as he relives in his mind and then on paper the influence which God has had on his life. He will induce a kind of spiritual crisis, brought on by the remembrance of past crises. This second crisis is obvious in the power with which he is able to describe his struggles, as in the temptation to sell Christ:

135. But it was neither my dislike of the thought nor yet any desire and endeavour to resist it, that in the least did shake or abate the continuation or force and strength thereof; for it did alwayes in almost whatever I thought, intermix itself therewith, in such sort that I could neither eat my food, stoop for a pin, chop a stick, or cast mine eye to look on this or that, but still the temptation would come, Sell Christ for this, or sell Christ for that; sell him, sell him.

136. Sometimes it would run in my thoughts not so little as a hundred times together, Sell him, sell him, sell him; against which I may say, for whole hours together I have been forced to stand as continually leaning and forcing my spirit against it, lest haply before I were aware, some wicked thought might arise in my heart that might consent thereto; and sometimes also the Tempter would make me believe I had consented to it, then I should be as tortured on a Rack for whole dayes together.

137. This temptation did put me to such scares lest I should at sometimes, I say, consent thereto, and be overcome therewith, that by the very force of my mind labouring to gainsay and resist this wickedness my very Body also would be put into





action or motion, by way of pushing or thrusting with my hands or elbows; still answering, as fast as the destroyer said, Sell him; I will not, I will not, I will not, I will not, no not for thousands, thousands, thousands of worlds; thus reckoning lest I should in the midst of these assaults, set too low a vallue of him, even until I scarce well knew where I was, or how to be composed again . . .

139. But to be brief, one morning, as I did lie in my Bed, I was, as at other times, most fiercely assaulted with this temptation, to sell and part with Christ; the wicked suggestion still running in my mind, Sell him, sell him, sell him, sell him, as fast as a man could speak; against which also in my mind, as at other times, I answered, No, no, not for thousands, thousands, thousands, at least twenty times together; but at last, after much striving, even until I was almost out of breath, I felt this thought pass through my heart, Let him go if he will! and I thought also that I felt my heart freely consent thereto. Oh, the diligence of Satan! Oh, the desperateness of man's heart!

(pp.42-43)

This is, I believe, the best passage in the whole work. It builds gradually, with the phrase "Sell him" and the countering "I will not" and "not for thousands, thousands, thousands" insisting and pushing the speaker towards the almost inevitable release in the overthrow by Satan. The reader must be moved by the power of this passage, but it seems that the author is also emotionally affected by the recollection. The insistent repetition of words or phrases in his resistance suggests that Bunyan once again needs to assure himself, even as he writes. He not only recalls this crisis: he lives it again. By the time he reaches his recovery many pages on, Bunyan the author is stronger, just as is the Bunyan in the account.

Similarly, Wordsworth not only recounts but relives





a number of spiritual crises throughout the course of The Prelude. The strength he hopes to gain, however, will prepare him not for salvation and eternal life, but for a poetic task which lies ahead. He plans the most important work of his life, for which The Prelude, as ambitious a project as it is, will serve as merely an "ante-chapel;" as he explains in the "Preface" to The Excursion:

Several years ago, when the Author retired to his native mountains, with the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live, it was a reasonable thing that he should take a review of his own mind, and examine how far Nature and Education had qualified him for such employment. As subsidiary to this preparation, he undertook to record, in verse, the origin and progress of his own powers, as far as he was acquainted with them. 5

This preparatory work would serve not merely as interesting background for the reader of The Recluse it will be a necessary foundation for the author. Without it, he would not have sufficient power to successfully complete his task. A gradual strengthening is apparent through some of the poem itself; at the end of Book I, for instance, Wordsworth says, "my mind / Hath been revived, and if this genial mood / Desert me not, forthwith shall be brought down / Through later years the story of my life" (I.636-39). In Book IV he claims that the book he writes is helping him "feel more deeply." The Prelude, then, is more than the relation of the "growth of a poet's mind," as the title suggests; it does itself advance that growth yet one more step. Through the recollection of



past events, both pleasant and painful, Wordsworth makes himself relive the event and feel it the second time as least as deeply as the first.

This is, of course, very like the process of creation described in Wordsworth's "Preface" to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. 6

The autobiographer deals with the events in his past as Wordsworth's ideal poet deals with his subject matter. Recollected events become a different creature the second time around, and may even be more moving for the creator. In other words, the events together will add up to more than their sum. Through the recognition of their experiences, both Bunyan and Wordsworth are able to renew themselves and to gain strength for the tasks ahead of them.

As well as having to strengthen themselves for their work, however, both Bunyan and Wordsworth feel the need to prove to other men that they are worthy of the tasks they have chosen. Bunyan, as a mechanick preacher, a tradesman with no formal theological training, faced the criticism and even persecution of those who would not accept his authority to preach the word of God. William York Tindall has provided a



detailed description of the seventeenth century group of preachers who, with limited education, carried out their ministry despite criticism from the established church.<sup>7</sup>

Bunyan was obviously sensitive to this, for at the end of his autobiography he includes a section entitled "A Brief Account of the Author's Call to the Work of the Ministry." In this short section, Bunyan discusses the gift which he felt came not from training or from human authorization, but from God alone. Indeed, he insists that he was at first reluctant to exercise his ministry:

267. After this, sometimes when some of them did go into the Countrey to teach, they would also that I should go with them; where, theough as yet I did not, nor durst not make use of my Gift in an open way, yet more privately still, as I came amongst the good People in those places, I did sometimes speak a word of Admonition unto them also.

( p.83 )

He also deals in Grace Abounding with charges of impropriety (pp.93-4). He was apparently accused of fornication with a woman in his congregation, after having given her a ride to a meeting which she would otherwise have had to miss.<sup>8</sup> It is not only his qualifications which required defending, then, but also his morality.

As well as these straight-forward words of self-defence, there are instances throughout the autobiography of more subtle self-justification. Indeed, every example of God's personal influence in his life is more proof that Bunyan's authority







is divinely sanctioned. In this light, Bunyan's encounter with the "antient Christian" is particularly interesting:

180. About this time I took an opportunity to break my Mind to an Antient Christian; and told him all my case. I told him also that I was afraid that I had sinned the sin against the Holy Ghost; and he told me He thought so too. Here therefore I had but cold comfort, but, talking a little more with him, I found him, though a good man, a stranger to much Combate with the Devil. Wherefore I went to God again as well as I could, for Mercie still.

( p.55)

Despite the older man's authority in the eyes of his society Bunyan makes it clear that his own struggles are the stronger. God and Satan have designated him a battlefield, a soul worthy of attention. It is never denied that the older man is good, or even that he is not elect, but Bunyan's authority, coming so directly from God, is the greater.

Wordsworth must also prove that he is worthy of the high goal he has set for himself. He wishes to create a work that will live, one which will place him in line with all great English poets, and particularly with Milton. If the progress of his mind and his poetic powers are shown strong enough, the attempt will be accepted. The intensity of the justification is less than in Grace Abounding, as Wordsworth does not respond to direct criticism as Bunyan does. A more complete apology for his poetics appears in the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads. There he defends his rather unorthodox attitudes towards his craft to a public accustomed to the



"gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers."<sup>7</sup>

Wordsworth undertakes, then, a defense of his own right to assume the title "poet," just as Bunyan asserts his right to be called a preacher, in the face of a different, popularly accepted definition of the term. The argument is, however, more forcefully made in the "Preface" than in The Prelude, where Wordsworth is more concerned with proving his abilities to himself than to others.

The three reasons for which both Bunyan and Wordsworth wrote their autobiographies all imply the existence of a gift or a talent which requires proving to the world, sharing with other men, and strengthening through reflection. These gifts, as the word suggests, are not self-generated, but are freely given by a superior power. The most interesting similarity between the two gifts, however, is that they both involve a dual benefit. One part of the gift affects the author's own welfare while the other is to benefit those around them; they gain both an increased understanding with which to carry out their own lives and an expressive power with which they are meant to touch others.

Bunyan's double gift is his personal salvation coupled with his talents as a preacher. The salvation is the more important, as he explains in the section concerning his ministry:

299. Just thus I saw it was and will be with them who have Gifts, but want saving-Grace; they are in the hand of Christ, as the Cymbal in the hand of David;



and as David could, with the Cymbal make that mirth in the service of God, as to elevate the hearts of the Worshipers; so Christ can use these gifted men, as with them to affect the Souls of his People in his Church, yet when he hath done all hang them by as lifeless, though sounding Cymbals.

(p.91)

Without first assuring himself of salvation, he may preach all he chooses and still be damned. The passage stresses the Puritan emphasis on grace rather than works or merit, but it also presents the division in the gift Bunyan enjoys, and makes plain the primacy of salvation.

The nature of Bunyan's election to the kingdom of heaven is essentially Calvinist, and Calvin explains the doctrine in Institutes:

God by his eternal and immutable counsel determined once and for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction . . . In regard to the elect, we regard calling as the evidence of election, and justification as another symbol of manifestation, until it is fully accomplished by the attainment of glory. But as the Lord seals the elect by calling and justification, so by excluding the reprobate either from the knowledge of his name or the sanctification of his Spirit, he by these marks in a manner discloses the judgement which awaits them. 10

This passage explains how one becomes elect or reprobate, but it also suggests the way in which election will affect a Saint's life in this world; the reprobate will, because he is reprobate, not be concerned with proving himself elect. The elect alone are able to understand the rather complex doctrine of grace, and thus the concern they feel about their fate is a good sign. The







elect will have a greater perception in spiritual matters than will the reprobate.

In the account of Bunyan's life this perception plays an essential role. He is first made aware of the higher level of spiritual understanding that grace may bring in his pivotal encounter with the good women of Bedford:

37. But upon a day, the good providence of God did cast me to Bedford, to work on my calling; and in one of the streets of that town, I came where there was three or four poor women sitting at a door in the Sun, and talking about the things of God; and being willing to hear them discourse, I drew near to hear what they said; for I was now a brisk talker also myself in matters of Religion: but now I may say, I heard, but I understood not; for they were far above out of my reach, for their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts, also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature: they talked how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the Devil; moreover, they reasoned of the suggestions and temptations of Satan in particular, and told each other by which they had been afflicted, and how they were borne up under his assaults: they also discoursed of their own wretchedness of heart, of their unbelief, and did condemn, slight, and abhor their own righteousness, as filthy, and insufficient to do them any good.

(p.14)

Bunyan recognizes that the difference between himself and these women is the gift of understanding. They could see "a new world" and spoke "as if joy made them speak" (p.15). Bunyan, however, is by no means proven devoid of grace here; that he can perceive that these women do have a deeper understanding than he does proves his potential for that same understanding.



He would not be able to recognise the higher spiritual level had he not had some of the understanding which accompanies grace. He is allowed to see that he does not yet fully see.

Immediately after his encounter with the Bedford women, Bunyan meets an old companion from his reckless youth:

43. One thing I may not omit, there was a young man in our Town, to whom my heart before was knit more than any other, but he being a most wicked Creature for cursing and swearing, and whoring, I shook him off and forsook his company; but about a quarter of a year after I had left him, I met him in a certain Lane, and asked him how he did; he after his old swearing and mad way, answered, he was well. But Harry, said I, why do you swear and curse thus? what will become of you if you die in this condition? He answered me in a great chafe, What would the Devil do for company if it were not for such as I am?

( p.16 )

The friend's answer comes almost as a joke; it is an off-the-cuff response to a deadly serious inquiry. The sinner apparently recognizes that his soul is in peril, but there is something less sincere in that recognition. The friend does not, in fact, appreciate the gravity of his situation. His understanding is deficient while Bunyan's is, in comparison, shown to be clearly solid.

Much further into the autobiography is another episode in which Bunyan's understanding is shown in relation to someone else's; this is the experience already quoted above with the "Antient Christian." This is the final step in an ascending progression. Bunyan is at first less perceptive than the Bedford women, then more so than an obvious sinner, and finally



even more so than an ancient Christian. The progression in perception makes clear, both to Bunyan and to his readers, the proof of his election.

One aspect of Wordsworth's gift does, like Bunyan's, affect perception, a perception which matures as the poet does. He is made sensitive to the power which moves beneath his natural surroundings, and this in turn brings him to a stronger feeling for mankind. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," an earlier poem, Wordsworth briefly explains this process:

For nature then  
 (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
 And their glad animal movements all gone by)  
 To me was all in all. - I cannot paint  
 What then I was. The sounding cataract  
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, nor any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye. - That time is past,  
 And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this  
 Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts  
 Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,  
 Abundant recompense. For I have learned  
 To look on nature, not as in the hour  
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
 The still, sad music of humanity. . . 11

The development is more complex in The Prelude but the steps are the same. In infancy Wordsworth says he had already begun to recognise a conscious force in Nature:

For this, didst thou,  
 O Derwent! winding among grassy holms  
 Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,







Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts  
 To more than infant softness, giving me  
 Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind  
 A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm  
 That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.

(I.274-81)

The responsiveness of this young child is accompanied by an aversion for mankind; Nature provides an escape from humanity and this attitude, Wordsworth concludes in "Tintern Abbey," made him "more like a man / Flying from something he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved" (ll.70-72). Indeed, the young Wordsworth's appreciation for Nature evokes only primitive responses, fear and guilt being the most common.<sup>12</sup> The episode in which Wordsworth steals the pinnacle is a striking example:

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,  
 And as I rose upon the stroke, my boat  
 Went heaving through the water like a swan;  
 When, from behind that craggy steep till then  
 The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,  
 As if with voluntary power instinct  
 Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,  
 And growing still in stature the grim shape  
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,  
 For so it seemed, with power of its own  
 And measured motion like a living thing,  
 Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,  
 And through the silent water stole my way  
 Back to the covert of the willow tree.

( I.357-87 )

He transgresses and fears in response physical retribution. Similarly the "low breathings" which follow him after he robs the traps are the simple threat which accompanies a simple



crime (I.323). These events occur when he is alone and involve sensitivity and responsiveness at a basic level.

As he matures, Wordsworth begins to realize that his sensitivity is uncommon. At Cambridge, although the attractions of a social existence become more appealing to him, he maintains a distance between himself and his colleagues:

. . . hither I had come,  
 Bear witness Truth, endowed with holy powers  
 And faculties, whether to work or feel.  
 Oft when the dazzling show no longer new  
 Had ceased to dazzle, ofttimes did I quit  
 My comrades, leave the crowd, buildings and groves,  
 As I paced alone the level fields  
 Far from those lovely sights and sounds sublime  
 With which I had been conversant, the mind  
 Drooped not; but there into herself returning,  
 With prompt rebound seemed fresh as heretofore.  
 At least I more distinctly recognized  
 Her native instincts.

(III.87-99)

As Wordsworth comes to understand the extent of his gift of perception, his feeling for mankind increases. He moves from a love for nature alone, to a love of man in natural surroundings, to a love for all mankind, all through his increasing understanding of the ministrations of Nature.<sup>13</sup> The climax of the poem comes in Book XIV, where, at the top of Mount Snowdon, the full force of Wordsworth's perception strikes him:

When into air had partially dissolved  
 That vision, given to the spirits of the night  
 And three chance human wanderers, in calm thought  
 Reflected, it appeared to me the type  
 Of majestic intellect, its acts  
 And its possessions, what it has and craves,  
 What in itself it is, and would become.



There I beheld the emblem of a mind  
 That feeds upon infinity, that broods  
 Over the dark abyss, intent to hear  
 Its voices issuing forth to silent light  
 In one continuous stream; a mind sustained  
 By recognitions of transcendent power,  
 . . . that men, least sensitive, see, hear, perceive,  
 And cannot choose but feel. The power, which all  
 Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus  
 To bodily sense exhibits, is the express  
 Resemblance of that glorious faculty  
 That higher minds bear with them as their own.

( XIV.63-90 )

Wordsworth is, by virtue of his constant and strong awareness of the power and the guidance of Nature, a superior mind.

Superior perception, then, is the gift which most affects the personal lives of both Bunyan and Wordsworth, but both also possess an ability which may affect the lives of other men. Because of their perception, the two may see more clearly, feel more deeply, and understand the powers that guide the universe more completely than most. The second part of their gifts allows them to communicate their insights to mankind. For both Wordsworth and Bunyan, this gift of expression appears after the exploration of their personal growth. Bunyan's autobiography includes an addition which describes his ministry, while Wordsworth's greatest poetic work is to follow the account of his life. The effect in both cases is that the autobiographer shifts attention outward, from the deep inner reaches of his own mind or soul to the welfare of those around him. Painful self-scrutiny, then, matures into a concern for others.





Once again, however, the gift of expression is believed to come not from within the author, but from the good grace of a superior power. The logical progression from individual concerns to concern for humanity is one controlled and arranged by that power. Each step that the two make is prepared for, almost as if they were characters, being written by an omnipotent and omniscient being.

God is clearly the prime mover in Bunyan's ministry. It is almost against Bunyan's wishes that the ability is recognised. Once he begins, however, his progress is ordered and regular:

278. Thus I went for the space of two years, crying out against mens sins, and their fearful state because of them. After which, the Lord came in upon my own Soul with some staid peace and comfort thorow Christ; for he did give me many sweet discoveries of his blessed Grace thorow him: wherefore now I altered in my preaching (for still I preached what I saw and felt;) now therefore I did much labour to hold forth Jesus Christ in all his Offices, Relations, and Benefits unto the World, and did strive also to discover, to condemn, and remove those false supports and props on which the World doth both lean, and by them fall and perish. On these things also I staid as long as on the other.

(p.86)

Note the pattern which emerges here. Bunyan preaches to one end, is made aware of another necessity and alters his preaching to accommodate that necessity for an equal amount of time as the first. A third step follows in which Bunyan is led into "something of the mystery of union with Christ." These three



stages Bunyan calls the "three chief points of the Word of God," and all three cover the space of "five years of more" (p.86). This means that the last stage also took about two years before he was cast in prison. The time elapsing in each stage, including the amount of time he says he has been in prison as he writes, is two years. Two years, then, is the amount of time Bunyan's very organised God has deemed appropriate to ensure the progress of his servant. The even distancing reinforces the idea of an ordered and logical will directing the course of Bunyan's ministry; more is revealed to him as he is able to accept more. The decision to write the autobiography figures in that pattern; it is the way open to him to continue to "perform the duty that from God doth lie upon" him, as he says in the "Preface" (p.1). All of this, then, supports Bunyan's claim to direct authority from God, and strengthens the vision of life of the Puritan, in which God has a very active role.

Bunyan understands the power of his talent to affect his audience, but is as aware of the dangers which may accompany such a talent. He fears that he will be unsuccessful, that he will blaspheme on the pulpit, that he will condemn himself even as he speaks, and particularly that he will become proud. He strives to find the best words to suit his message and move his audience. He takes his expressive gift, then, very seriously.

It is no more incongruous to speak of Wordsworth's poetry in religious terms than it is to speak of Bunyan's



ministry in artistic terms. This second part of Wordsworth's gift is again given rather than earned:

Such dispositions then were mine unearned  
By aught, I fear the genuine desert -  
Mine, through heaven's grace and inborn aptitudes.

(VI.168-69)

Wordsworth writes of his gift in terms usually reserved for religious callings. The words "prophetic," "priestly," and "holy" are frequently employed, as in the following passage:

This narrative, my Friend! hath chiefly told  
Of intellectual power, fostering love,  
Dispensing truth, and, over men and things,  
Where reason might yet hesitate, diffusing  
Prophetic sympathies of genial faith:  
So was I favoured - such my happy lot -

(XII.44-49)

In Book XIII he presents what he chose as his theme, "no other than the very heart of man," and states,

it shall be my pride  
That I have dared to tread this holy ground,  
Speaking no dream, but things oracular.

(XIII.251-53)

Wordsworth's poetic ability is the result of an exceedingly high calling, which from his own language would not inappropriately be called a holy vocation.

Both Bunyan and Wordsworth, then, are given two gifts, one for personal improvement and the other for the benefit of others. The emphasis the two place on their gifts, however,





differs. For Wordsworth, his expressive gift, poetry, is the more important, while Bunyan stresses the importance of personal salvation. Wordsworth looks at his life primarily concerned with finding evidence that he is worthy of the high title "poet," while the evidence which Bunyan seeks must prove him saved. What both men favour, then, is the part of their gift which will best ensure them a little immortality. Wordsworth wishes to create a "work that will live" as a result of his autobiography, a work which will continue, one assumes, long after the poet is dead, and Bunyan's personal election will ensure him an eternal place in the kingdom of heaven. Both of them prefer that part of their gift which is the most fastened on eternity. They look back at their own lives that they may securely look forward, even beyond their own deaths.

Election does not mean stasis, however. Wordsworth and Bunyan suffer strong doubts, doubts that they are in fact elect, but also doubts that they will be worthy of the tasks assigned them. They fear backsliding and so constantly question their own motives, abilities and actions.

In Bunyan's life this fear is particularly severe. The title of the work itself presents from the outset Bunyan's quite proper sense of his own unworthiness. Calling himself the "Chief of Sinners," is not merely a boastful claim, born of a kind of perverse pride. He merely expresses the sincere feeling of a man who has been granted a great gift he feels he cannot possibly deserve.



The entire opening of the autobiography establishes that Bunyan owes his conversion solely to God. He begins, we are told, with no advantages, is born of a poor family and has been given only minimal education.<sup>14</sup> Bunyan's father was, it is known, of the Church of England, but no mention is made of this in Grace Abounding;<sup>15</sup> this suggests that Bunyan wishes his readers to see him beginning life as a clean slate, with neither material advantages nor spiritual influences. While the youthful Bunyan does his best to commit as many sins as possible, God begins to pull the sinner towards conversion. There are three striking brushes with death, a near-drowning, a near-poisoning, and a near-shooting. In the first two, God delivers Bunyan from a dangerous situation, the first an accident and the second a foolish risk taken by Bunyan. The experience while a soldier, however, shows God choosing to have another man die in Bunyan's place. In each case, then, God appears to increase his involvement, from saving Bunyan from an accident, to saving him from his own foolhardiness, to saving him from another man's bullet at yet another man's expense. God then provides Bunyan with a suitably pious wife, who comes complete with two soul-saving books, and reveals himself through the clouds while Bunyan is at a game of cat. Finally, he is, by "the good providence of God," led to the good women of Bedford, who bring him by their inspired words to conversion. Bunyan is being pulled by God to a new spiritual life, one for which he is not responsible.



Bunyan is so aware of how little he merits the gift he receives that he is tortured by the knowledge of his own inadequacy. He puts himself through tests and subjects himself to doubts. He even compares himself to the other people of Bedford, who walk, he writes, "like a people that carried the broad Seal of Heaven about them," while he finds that "lusts and corruptions would strongly put themselves within me, in wicked thoughts and desires" and he grows "worse and worse" (pp.25-26). In his vision of the mountain, he sits in the cold and dark, while on the other side sit the people of Bedford in the warmth of the sun (p.19). He is assaulted with the temptation to believe that the day of grace is "past and gone":

. . . and to aggravate my trouble, the Tempter presented to my mind those good people of Bedford, and suggested thus unto me, That these being converted already, they were all that God would save in those parts, and that I came too late, for these had got the blessing before I came.

( p.22 )

If there is one thing more painful than believing that one is damned, it must be believing that everyone else has been saved.

Much of what a twentieth century audience would view as self-torment Bunyan attributes to the wiles of Satan. He fights long internal battles, the worst of which involves a temptation to "sell Christ." I quote the episode again in part:





But it was neither my dislike of the thought, nor yet any desire and endeavor to resist it, that in the least did shake or abate the continuation or force and strength thereof; for it did always in almost whatever I thought, intermix itself therewith, in such sort that I could neither eat my food, stoop for a pin, chop a stick or cast mine eye to look on this or that, but still the temptation would come, "Sell Christ for this, or sell Christ for that; sell him, sell him" . . . At these seasons he would not let me eat my food at quiet, but forsooth, when I was set at the table at my meal, I must go hence to pray, I must leave my food now, just now . . .

(pp.42-3)

Bunyan feels the need to do something to counter an inner temptation. He cannot properly fight the thought or banish it from his mind, so he takes the battle outside himself; a physical action, such as the movement from the table, is meant to bring the temptation to a level on which it can be more effectively dealt with. This externalizing of internal problems and anxieties is consistent with the importance of Satan as a sparring partner in these struggles. I do not wish to dismiss how strongly Bunyan obviously felt about the existence of the Devil, nor apply Freudian principles to this Puritan belief, but the tendency to translate the spiritual into the external is surely a constant in this work of Bunyan. His ability to do so explains why his allegories have remained his greatest triumphs.

Bunyan's constant questioning sometimes appears to result in a perverse desire to fail, to backslide and be proven reprobate. He feels the desire to blaspheme from the pulpit. He tries to sin as much as possible when he is the least bit



discouraged. There is a mixture of fear and desire which has been brilliantly diagnosed in John Morris' Versions of the Self as a kind of acrophobia; just as the fear of heights will often be accompanied by a desire to jump, the revulsion of sinning may be very close to the desire to sin. This coupling almost overwhelms Bunyan.<sup>16</sup>

The result of this need to do that which one fears is not only that Bunyan is drawn to sin, but also that he is drawn to physical pain. He refers to his spiritual situations in physical terms. His conscience is tender; he "durst not take a pin or a stick, though but so big as a straw; for my conscience now was sore, and would smart at every touch" (p.26). Later he believed that "every voice was fire; every little touch would hurt my tender conscience" (p.72). The physical references in the following passage approach the masochistic:

About this time, I did light on that dreadful story of that miserable mortal, Francis Spira; A book that was to my troubled spirit as salt, when rubbed into a fresh wound; every sentence of that book, every groan of that man, with all the rest of his actions in his dolours, as his tears, his prayers, his gnashing of teeth, his wringing of hands, twining and twisting, languishing and pining away under that mighty hand of God that was upon him, was as knives and daggers to my Soul; especially that sentence of his was frightful to me, Man knows the beginning of sin, but who bounds the issues thereof? Then would the former sentence, as the conclusion of all, fall like a hot thunder-bolt again upon my Conscience.

( pp.49-50 )

Bunyan pictures the intangible parts of himself, his soul and his conscience, being physically wounded. The violence exceeds



the usual clichés the reader may be used to hearing; the salt is rubbed not merely in a wound, but in "fresh wounds," the thunder-bolt is "hot," adding more tactile imagery to an already powerfully affecting image. The passage immediately after this one shifts the violence from the inside of Bunyan to the outside:

Then I was struck into a very great trembling, insomuch that at sometimes I could for whole days together feel my very body as well as my minde to shake and totter under the sence of the dreadful Judgement of God, that should fall on those that have sinned that most fearful and unpardonable sin. I felt also such a clogging and heat at my stomach by reason of this terrour, that I was, especially at some times, as if my breast-bone would have split in sunder.

(p.50)

He feels, he says at another time, as if "racked upon a wheel" and yet another time as if his torment would "grind [him] as it were to powder" (p.46). Bunyan's desire for the gift of election and his desire to be worthy of that gift is so strong, that his feelings of self-doubt and deficiency are magnified to painfully imagined self-torture.

Wordsworth, too, feels strongly that he may not be worthy of the gift which Nature has offered him, although his self-doubt never reaches the violent degree to which Bunyan carries his. Independence, liberty and freedom from restraint were essential to Wordsworth, and yet he readily accepts the responsibility which his calling places upon him. This makes him unconcerned with human censure or punishment, but, as is







clear from the early experience with the stolen boat and the trapped birds, he is deeply aware of the disapproval of Nature. This resembles, then, the fears which the Puritans experience; it is not imprisonment or social disapproval, but the rebuke of a superior power which is most dreadful.

The primitive, childish fears and feelings of guilt which Wordsworth describes in Books I and II become more sophisticated as the poet matures; as the knowledge of his intellectual and poetic abilities increases, the crimes he can commit and the punishments he fears shift inward. While at first he committed physical wrongs against Nature, such as the stealing of the boat or the killing of the stolen birds, he comes to fear shirking the responsibility which his gift has conferred upon him. Just as the crimes shift from physical to spiritual, so too does the form of punishment shift, rather than the visible growth of the peak coming after him or the audible "low breathings", he begins to fear the knowledge of failure itself, a spiritual punishment.

Bunyan undergoes the same kind of development. His first concerns are for those crimes which are visible: swearing, gaming, dancing and bell-ringing. When he overcomes these, his is still but an "outward reformation":

For though, as yet, I was nothing but a poor painted Hypocrite, yet I loved to be talked of as one that was truly Godly. I was proud of my Godliness; and, I did all I did, either to be seen of, or to be well spoken of, by men.



His rewards are outward, visible and audible, as were his crimes. His fears involve physical pain on earth, such as the falling of the bell on him. Immediately after he has encountered the good women of Bedford, however, he is awakened to the joys and rewards, crimes and punishments which are truly spiritual. Now the problems which plague him are struggles with the Devil over doctrine: "But how if you want Faith indeed?", "How can you tell you are elected?", "Sell him, sell him", "But how is the day of grace should now be past and gone?" His sense of responsibility turns inward, as does Wordsworth's, as he matures.

Wordsworth's maturation, as already mentioned, involves the recognition of his "gifts," and his greatest fear, then, is that he will prove himself unworthy. He conveys the strength of his responsibility in Book IV:

Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim  
 My heart was full: I made no vows, but vows  
 Were then made for me; bond unknown to me  
 Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
 A dedicated spirit. On I walked  
 In thankful blessedness, which yet survives.

(IV.333-38)

His concern about this "sinning" emerges in Book I, even before the account of his life begins. He feels dry; his mind at every turn encounters "Impediments from day to day renewed":

Thus my days are past  
 In contradiction; with no skill to part  
 Vague longing, haply bred by want of power,  
 From paramount impulse not to be withstood,



A timorous capacity from prudence,  
 From circumspection, infinite delay.  
 Humility and modest awe themselves  
 Betray me, serving often for a cloak  
 To a more subtle selfishness; that now  
 Locks every function up in blank reserve,  
 Now dupes me, trusting to an anxious eye  
 That with intrusive restlessness beats off  
 Simplicity and self-presented truth.

( I.237-49)

This gnawing sense of inadequacy which appears so often throughout the course of the poem is clarified a few lines along:

Far better to have never heard the name  
 Of zeal and just ambition, than to live  
 Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour  
 Turns recreant to her task; takes heart again,  
 Then feels immediately some hollow thought  
 Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.  
 This is my lot; for either still I find  
 Some imperfection in the chosen theme,  
 Or see of absolute accomplishment  
 Much wanting, so much wanting, in myself,  
 That I recoil and droop, and seek repose  
 In listlessness from vain perplexity,  
 Unprofitably travelling toward the grave,  
 Like a false steward who hath much received  
 And renders nothing back.

(I.255-69)

While at Cambridge he begins to recognise his tendency to neglect his appointed work:

In this mixed sort  
 The months passed on, remissly, not given up  
 To wilful alienation from the right  
 Or walks of open scandal, but in vague  
 And loose indifference, easy likings, aims  
 Of a low pitch - duty and zeal dismissed,  
 Yet Nature, or a happy course of things  
 Not doing in their stead the needful work.  
 The memory languidly revolved, the heart





Reposed in noontide rest, the inner pulse  
Of contemplation almost failed to beat.

III.324-34

He was, he says, a "spoiled child" of Nature, who claims all blame for his own failures:

- To time thus spent, add multitudes of hours  
Pilfered away, by what the bard who sang  
Of the Enchanter Indolence hath called  
'Good-natured lounging', and behold a map  
Of my collegiate life - far less intense  
Than duty called for, or, without regard  
To duty, might have sprung up of itself  
By change of accidents, or even, to speak  
Without unkindness, in another place.  
Yet why take refuge in that plea? - the fault,  
This I repeat, was mine; mine be the blame.

VI.179-89

In these cases, Wordsworth is conscious of his unworthiness in retrospect. The tension comes from the mature Wordsworth passing judgement on his immature self, with no allowances made for the carefree nature of the young; he has a responsibility, one which may for no reason be abandoned.

The accounts of the early lives of Bunyan and Wordsworth present two men who function under the strain of intense inner conflict. They believe themselves to be elect, and so recognise their superior potential, yet because they are gifted the possibility of failure is so much more to be dreaded. A delicate balance is struck between hope and despair, joy and fear, confidence and guilt, and that balance is made more delicate by their absolute dependence on supreme power. This, then, is



the dynamic state of mind which Bunyan and Wordsworth carry through the course of their autobiographies, a factor which colours all events, and all stages in their development.



## Chapter Two: Conversion

The principle of organisation which governs the spiritual autobiographies of Bunyan and Wordsworth is conversion. Both men select in retrospect those points in their lives which they believe have been pivotal. A point of conversion may represent a moment of sudden insight or the conclusion of a gradual movement towards a truth. In either case, the convert is able to understand something about himself, his world, or his God which had been before that point hidden from him. Perception, then, is altered, and even with occasional setbacks, the convert will never return to his original state of ignorance; he operates on a new spiritual level. Conversion marks the end of one stage of development and the beginning of the next. Bunyan and Wordsworth experience these moments of change, but it is even more interesting that they both experience double conversions, a rather less common pattern, which give the two a similar structure.

Conversions within an autobiography alter the perspective from which the author writes. In an autobiography, the speaker usually looks from a point in the future at events in the past. Enough time should have elapsed between the actual event and its retelling to allow a degree of objectivity; the author





should write as if he observed another man. This is no easy task for the autobiographer as he writes primarily of his motives and feelings, for which he is the only witness. The difficulty must have been keenly felt by Bunyan and by Wordsworth, as both revised their autobiographies over several decades.

The author begins somewhere in early childhood, and from his position years ahead he turns his eyes forward and follows an almost chronological path until he reaches what he believes to be an appropriate stopping point. This point usually falls somewhere in early adulthood, often in one's late twenties or early thirties. It is assumed that by this time the major process of growth and education has ended, and maturity has been attained. For those autobiographers who aspire to imitate the life of Christ, the relatively short span of thirty-three years has particular significance.<sup>1</sup> Augustine and Bunyan end their accounts when they have reached the age of thirty-two, and in other Puritan spiritual autobiographies the ages thirty-two and thirty-three are the most common.<sup>2</sup> In all cases, however, the space of time covered is finite, with a chosen beginning and ending. The author, from his distanced vantage point, has the ability to deal with this space of time from two distinct perspectives: he records that which he remembers feeling at the time an event occurs, and he may also provide a judgement of that feeling which the passage of time has allowed him to reach. He experiences a kind of double vision which, rather than blurring the image, clarifies it. Two different analyses



are provided for the same experience.

In Grace Abounding this dual perspective often comes into play, as in Bunyan's account of the game of cat. He is struck in the soul by a voice from heaven and he immediately afterwards summarizes the event and decided on a plan of action:

24. Thus I stood in the midst of my play, before all that then were present; but yet I told them nothing: but, I say, I having made this conclusion that I was damned, I returned desperately to my sport again; and I well remember, that presently this kind of despair did so possess my Soul, that I was perswaded I could never attain to other comfort then what I should get in sin; for Heaven was gone already, so that on that I must not think: wherefore I found within me a great desire to take my fill of sin, still studdying what sin was set to be committed, that I might taste the sweetness of it; and I made as much haste as I could to fill my belly with its delicates, lest I should die before I had my desire; for that I feared greatly. In these things, I protest before God, I lye not, neither do I feign this sort of speech: these were really, strongly, and with all my heart, my desires; the good Lord, whose mercy is unsearchable, forgive me my trangressions.

(p.11)

Bunyan is able to recall in vivid detail not only the event itself, but also the force of his frenzied despair and the steps his mind then took before arriving at his decided course of action. He must have recognised that the clarity of his recollection would appear remarkable to his readers, as he feels it necessary to defend the verisimilitude of his description. He then continues with a comment on the event in retrospect:



(And I am very confident, that this temptation of the Devil is more than usual amongst poor creatures then many are aware of, even to over-run their spirits with a scurvie and seared frame of heart, and benumbing of conscience: which frame he stillly and slyly supplyeth with such despair, that though not much guilt attendeth the Soul, yet they continually have a secret conclusion within them, that there is no hopes for them . . .)

( p.11)

He is able to understand the true cause of his error in retrospect and presents two analyses of the same situation almost simultaneously.

Another good example of Bunyan's split perception comes as he struggles with the fear that, like Esau, he has sold his birthright and therefore God may abandon him:

217. Yet I was grievous afraid he should, and found it exceedingly hard to trust him, seeing I had so offended him: I could have been exceeding glad that this thought had never befallen, for then I thought I could, with more ease, freedom and abundance, have leaned upon his grace: I see it was with me, as it was with Joseph's Brethren; the guilt of their own wickedness did often fill them with fears, that their Brother would at last despise them, Gen.50.15,16,17,18.

( p.68 )

The original state of mind is explained in the past tense and it is then reconsidered by the recollecting Bunyan in the present. There are, then, two ways in which Bunyan presents his dual perspective: either one paragraph in the past may be followed by one in the present, or the two states of mind may both find a place in the same paragraph.

Wordsworth also uses these two patterns, but prefers







the alternating effect of the two complementary paragraphs. The first paragraph will describe the event and his reaction at the time, while the second will explain or elaborate upon the significance of the event to the course of his life. This pattern is particularly obvious in Books I and II, as in the following example:

Nor less when spring had warmed the cultured Vale,  
 Moved we as plunderers where the mother-bird  
 Had in high places built her lodge; though mean  
 Our object and inglorious, yet the end  
 Was not ignoble. Oh! when I have hung  
 Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass  
 And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock  
 But ill-sustained, and almost (so it seemed)  
 Suspended by the blast that blew amain,  
 Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time  
 While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,  
 With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind  
 Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky  
 Of earth - and with what motion moved the clouds!

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows  
 Like harmony in music; there is a dark  
 Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles  
 Discordant elements, makes them cling together  
 In one society. How strange that all  
 The terrors, pains, and early miseries,  
 Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused  
 Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,  
 And that a needful part, in making up  
 The calm existence that is mine when I  
 Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!  
 Thanks to the means Nature deigned to employ;  
 Whether her fearless visitings, or those  
 That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light  
 Opening the peaceful clouds; or she may use  
 Severer interventions, ministry  
 More palpable, as best might suit her aim.

(I.326-56)

Wordsworth also provides both recollections and interpretation



or judgement in the same sentence, sometimes even more compactly than does Bunyan. In Book II he says, "I was taught to feel, perhaps too much, / The self-sufficing power of solitude"; the memory of what he experienced is presented in the same line with a judgement of that experience from his removed vantage point. This more compact presentation of past and present does, in fact, do more to impress the nearly simultaneous operation of both points of view.

The presence of moments of conversion or shifts in the level of perception adds yet another dimension to this framework. The convert carries on his life on a new plane of understanding, but he may also look back and analyse his immediate past with greater clarity. After Bunyan hears the good women of Bedford speak, he says, "I saw that in all my thoughts about Religion and Salvation, the New birth did never enter my mind, neither knew I the comfort of the Word and Promise, nor the deceitfulness and treachery of my own wicked heart." He judges the motives of his immediate past from a new perspective as he moves on to a new stage in his development. Wordsworth also recognises the increasing depth of his own perception as he matures. As his instinctive love of Nature develops into a love of mankind, he recognises the times of change and the fact that he has passed from one stage to the next. His first major turning-point comes at the end of Book IV, where he believes "vows" were made for him, and he sets out to redirect his life, to become a dedicated spirit,



and he realizes at this time that the years which preceded this consecration have lacked that direction.

The retrospection of the newly-converted man resembles the retrospection of the autobiographer. The convert within the autobiography surveys a shorter period of time, while the autobiographer writing the work surveys his entire youth; but both perceive their pasts with the distance of a person at a new stage in his development. The autobiography, then, is merely the first written form of this kind of retrospection; other periods in his life have received the same scrutiny and the same judgement. This repeated retrospection which culminates in the need to write the story of one's life betrays a desire to see oneself in progress. It is the comforting belief that one is moving in the right direction, that there is a perceptible difference between what one was last year and what one is now to which this retrospection should lead.

Perhaps this comfort accounts for the double "conversions" in both Grace Abounding and The Prelude. If there were but one, the author would move from a period of darkness to a period of enlightenment. With numerous moments of revelation, that enlightenment is repeatedly refined; there is no stasis, and in Grace Abounding and The Prelude the process is never complete.

In order to defend a double conversion pattern in Grace Abounding one should first explore the many structural outlines which critics have assigned it over the years. Even those who believe there is but one major conversion incident cannot







agree on which incident it is. Margaret Botrall and Roger Sharrock believe the single pivotal event is the meeting with the women of Bedford;<sup>3</sup> Ola Wilson believes it comes during the game of cat, and Dean Ebner sees it occurring in the battle of the scriptural passages.<sup>4</sup> Richard Greaves is careful to insist that there is no single moment of conversion, but he believes the process begins with the harsh words of the "loose and ungodly wretch" aimed at Bunyan's vice of swearing.<sup>5</sup> James Thorpe believes the most illuminating way in which to describe the structure of the work is as a movement towards and away from Bunyan's greatest fall, his decision to sell Christ.<sup>6</sup> Anne Hawkins recognises a double conversion pattern, with the first moment falling at the vision of "salvation from Heaven, with many golden Seals thereon" (p.40), and the second at the battle of the scriptures (pp.66-7). This theory certainly has some merit. Bunyan does indeed believe the vision of the scrolls to be the long looked-for evidence of election:

128. Now I had an evidence, as I thought, of my salvation from Heaven, with many golden Seals thereon, all hanging in my sight; now I could remember this manifestation, and the other discovery of grace with comfort; and should often long and desire that the last day were come, that I might forever be inflamed with the sight, and joy, and communion of him, whose Head was crowned with Thorns, whose Face was spit on, and Body broken, and Soul made an offering for my sins: for whereas before I lay continually trembling at the mouth of Hell; now me thought I was got so far therefrom, that I could not, when I looked back, scarce discern it; and O thought I, that were fourscore years old now, that I might die quickly, that my soul might be gone to rest.



At this point Bunyan believes he has reached the pinnacle of his spiritual life, from which he cannot help but decline. This episode is, however, remarkably understated for what is supposed to be the most important moment in the autobiography. As well, it is immediately followed by a deep plunge into the work's most trying temptation, leaving Bunyan little chance to reflect on the joys of election. Even this explanation, then, is not wholly satisfactory.

All of the events cited as possible moments of conversion do, in fact, play important roles in the progress. The interruption of the game of cat is certainly striking both to Bunyan and to his reader, but he is far from saved as an immediate result. He chooses to believe the sign is one of damnation, and continues to sin with even greater intensity. The real significance of this event, then, is that it is the first time Bunyan recognises the hand of God in his own life. Next Bunyan is upbraided by an old woman for his swearing, an encounter which does effect some change in Bunyan's behavior; he is so shocked to have a wicked woman call him wicked that he forbears swearing and amends his outward behavior. There is, however, no spiritual change until he hears the words of the good women of Bedford. The wicked woman could only have been able to determine what was visibly unacceptable, while the good women, with their greater understanding through salvation, can prompt a spiritual change. Bunyan does not immediately acknowledge his conversion, but he continues to



think deeply of what he has heard, and through that thought he is able to perceive himself and his attempts at religion in a completely new way. Before, there had been but an outward reformation, effected for an audience, but the good women plant in him the seeds of true spiritual reformation.

The major events of Grace Abounding, then, follow a logical pattern. The first four lead Bunyan gradually towards conversion. God first sends his servant a supernatural message which is ignored. Then a message is conveyed through a natural medium, the wicked old woman, and outward reformation begins. The good women begin his inner reformation, and the evidence of election confirms his conversion. This last is the evidence they physically-minded Bunyan requires. The height of the entire process is, however, at the encounter with the women of Bedford. He is only then allowed to begin to understand the depth of the commitment Christianity demands. This first conversion is a progression, then, which begins with the game of cat, peaks at the words of the good women, and becomes final at the vision of the seals. He then immediately plunges into two years plagued with despair and doubts only to emerge even stronger. It is a pattern of progress, conversion, fall and rebirth.

The structure of Wordsworth's Prelude follows a similar pattern. He begins with instinct, and inborn sensitivity to Nature. Through his early youth, this first stage develops into a second, a love of man in natural surroundings and a







dedication to his gift. This second stage begins at the end of Book IV; he says then that "vows" were made for him, and the import of this stage is illustrated by his encounter with the old soldier, a story which closes the book:

The cottage door was speedily unbarred,  
 And now the soldier touched his hat once more  
 With his lean hand, and in a faltering voice,  
 Whose tone bespoke reviving interests  
 Till then unfelt, he thanked me; I returned  
 The farewell blessing of the patient man,  
 And so we parted. Back I cast a look,  
 And lingering near the door a little space,  
 Then sought with quiet heart my distant home.

(IV.461-69)

Here the interest in mankind finds practical application in this quietly moving passage.

The next stage presents the development of Wordsworth's feeling for mankind in his natural surroundings into a love for all mankind. This section reaches its climax with the French Revolution in Book IX, and once again, Wordsworth marks this change with an incident, this time an encounter with a starving girl:

. . . Yet not the less,  
 Hatred of absolute rule, where will of one  
 Is law for all, and of that barren pride  
 In them who, by immunities unjust,  
 Between the sovereign and the people stand,  
 His helper and not theirs, laid stronger hold  
 Daily upon me, mixed with pity too  
 And love; for where hope is, there love will be  
 For the abject multitude. And when we chanced  
 One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,  
 Who crept along fitting her languid gait  
 Unto a heifer's motion, by a cord  
 Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane  
 Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands



Was busy knitting in a heartless mood  
 Of solitude, and at the sight my friend  
 In agitation said, "Tis against that  
 That we are fighting," I with him believed  
 That a benignant spirit was abroad  
 Which might not be withstood, that poverty  
 Abject as this would in a little time  
 Be found no more, that we should see the earth  
 Unthwarted in her wish to recompense  
 The meek, the lowly, patient child of toil.

( IX.501-24 )

Wordsworth is drawn to a strong love for mankind and a fierce desire to see justice for all. He has now reached the climax of his first "conversion."

Like Bunyan, however, Wordsworth has not much time to enjoy his new-found perception. He experiences a period of deep despair as a result of the violence which followed the initial stages of the Revolution. It is a despair resulting not only from the horror of the Reign of Terror, but also from its contrast to the high ideals to which the Revolution had originally aspired. It would have been one of the worst possible times for the romantic spirit; all restrictions in France had been abolished, the King killed, and yet freedom devolved rapidly into chaos, and more innocents suffered as a result. It brought out the worst rather than the best in men.

Books XI to XIV, however, relate Wordsworth's recovery from that despair. This stage, too, has its climactic moment in an incident, this time at the top of Mount Snowdon, part of which has been quoted in Chapter I. On Snowden Wordsworth



reaffirms his bond with Nature and with his fellow man, and develops a better understanding of himself.<sup>8</sup> It is at this point that he chooses to end his autobiography, but it is by no means the end of his trials. He confesses many times throughout the course of the poem his frustrations and continued doubts, even as he writes. The need to clarify his position by writing the autobiography is another attempt to further his own growth, to continue the process of which the autobiography tells only the beginning.

The pattern of conversion, crisis and recovery is not unique to Bunyan and Wordsworth. There are other examples, such as those of Anna Trapnel and James Fraser.<sup>9</sup> The most important models, those of Augustine and Saint Paul, however, present but one conversion. This was the pattern adopted by seventeenth century Quakers and Ranters, because in varying degrees both sects believed that with conversion they had achieved a species of human perfection.<sup>10</sup> There are, then, two possible patterns for the spiritual autobiographer, one with one conversion, and a second with a series of rises and falls.

The pattern which Bunyan and Wordsworth employ has the advantage of a crisis section, which John Morris explains in terms of nineteenth century autobiography:

The value that both Wordsworth and Mill put on their periods of despondency and mental crisis is important for the same reasons. It connects them with other men of their century. And, again, it connects them with us. However thoroughly we





may have cheapened and vulgarized the idea, we still believe, in some very general sense, that to be really serious people we must be "twice-born" - through psycho-analysis, perhaps, or neurotic collapse, or some other deep personal distress. This fact lends urgency to an inquiry into the origins of the notion. Sometimes it seems to have some relation to the experience of religious conversion. 11

As well as linking the secular collapses with religious conversion, Morris suggests that the steeling of one's own nature through crisis is a universally accepted process. Mankind learns and grows through trial and suffering, and, just as small advances are made conquering small obstacles, so great leaps come from great crises. Life is an ongoing process, and, as Bunyan and Wordsworth were susceptible to failure after their first experience with conversion, so will they continue to be susceptible after the second. Life is, as Bunyan described in his autobiography, a series of "castings down, and raisings up."

There have been other explanations of the significance of this pattern. Anne Hawkins defines it in terms of the life of Christ:

In the language of Calvinist dogma, the progress between the two conversion episodes is represented as that between justification and sanctification, and is imaged forth in the transition from the reference to the crucified Christ, which occurs just after the second conversion. Thus the crucified Christ represents the youthful hero at the beginning of his soteriological journey, burdened by guilt both acknowledged and unacknowledged. On the other hand, the vision of the exalted Christ represents the mature Bunyan's liberation from guilt, a certitude which can affirm the self only by looking beyond it. 12



M.H. Abrams presents an interpretation along the same lines:

A more important and dramatic phenomenon was the tendency, grounded in texts of the New Testament itself, to internalize apocalypse by transferring the theatre of events from the outer earth and heaven to the spirit of the single believer, in which there enacts itself, metaphorically, the entire eschatological drama of the destruction of the old creation, the union with Christ, and the emergence of a new creation. 13

The three-stage process, then, may be a personal re-enactment of the Easter experience, or of the events to take place during the apocalypse. If expanded, however, the entirety of Biblical history can be seen to follow the double conversion pattern. Old testament history is mankind in its natural state. This state is altered drastically with the coming of Christ, and mankind experiences a kind of mass conversion. There is then, however, a falling back, which will continue until the end of the world, a second conversion which will bring about the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. This interpretation is particularly appropriate to the autobiographies of Bunyan and Wordsworth; just as the period before the coming of Christ was an age of law and justice, so too do the stages in Grace Abounding and The Prelude before "conversion" deal with transgression and punishment. Thereafter the concern for a superior power moves inward, and punishment is no longer physical and temporal: it becomes the pain from the knowledge of unworthiness.

Wordsworth and Bunyan, then, share a similar view of the shape their own lives have taken, a view which in turn



determines the structure of their autobiographies. If the concept of election suggests a similarity in the role of the main characters in Grace Abounding and The Prelude, a similarity in characterisation, then the conversion pattern provides a similar plot structure; the actual events differ but the direction in which they lead is the same.





### Chapter III: Experience

The spiritual autobiography is concerned primarily with what transpires within the mind or the soul of the autobiographer over a period of time. Externally verifiable events exist, but they are the exception. Such experiences serve as examples or ornaments which, as Frank Towne suggests, support, clarify and illustrate the author's spiritual progress.<sup>1</sup> It is remarkable, then, that in both Grace Abounding and The Prelude these secondary "ornaments" leave the most lasting impression. Their infrequency itself may in part explain their freshness, but it is more the almost supernatural intensity with which the autobiographers infuse these incidents that invites the reader to recall Bunyan's bell-ringing episode or Wordsworth's stolen boat before the many other meditative passages on man, nature, or God. When the fierce investigation of their inner lives turns momentarily to the world around them and their own physical experience a metaphysical or supernatural quality remains and the ordinary is shrouded in the extraordinary.

This tendency in Grace Abounding springs from Bunyan's Calvinism. Any ordinary object, chance encounter or fleeting thought may provide the searching sinner with vital evidence of election or damnation. Conversely, were one elect one would



hold the power to discern the hand of God guiding the simplest aspects of life; as Isaac Ambrose suggests, "if it [the heart] be sanctified, it ordinarily distils holy sweet and useful Meditation out of all objects."<sup>2</sup>

Bunyan urges his audience to reflect on the commonplace in life in his "Preface":

Remember, I say, the Word that first laid hold upon you; remember your terrours of conscience, and fear of death and hell: remember also your tears and prayers to God; yea, how you sighed under every hedge for mercy. Have you never a hill Mizar to remember? Have you forgotten the Close, the Milk-House, the Stable, the Barn, and the like where God did visit you soul?

( p.3)

It would undoubtedly be comforting for the poor folk of Bedford to know that God's presence is as readily felt in a cowshed as in a castle. God orders all things, and thus the most insignificant incident must figure as part of his vast plan. Even accidents are acts of God.

Wordsworth believed so strongly in the importance of the commonplace that he incorporates it into his poetic theory, as outlined in the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from everyday life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect. <sup>3</sup>



Some of the harshest criticism of Wordsworth's poetry by his contemporaries has been levelled at this very intention. Anna Seward, in a letter commenting on Lyrical Ballads, calls Wordsworth an "egotistical manufacturer of metaphysical importance upon trivial themes."<sup>4</sup> Coleridge's objections are as damning:

There is, I should say, not seldom a matter-of-factness in certain poems. This may be divided into, first a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects and their positions, as they appeared to the poet himself; secondly the insertion of accidental circumstances might be necessary to establish the probability of a statement in real life, where nothing is taken for granted by the hearer; but appears superfluous in poetry, where the reader is willing to believe for his own sake. 5

Anxious adherence to detail would, according to Coleridge, destroy the barrier between poetry and prose. Even without his prose criticism it is evident from Coleridge's poetry that he and Wordsworth disagreed on their choice of suitable poetic subjects. While Coleridge wrote of stately pleasure-domes and ancient mariners, Wordsworth found as much magic in a sea of daffodils or an evening of skating. His was in part reaction to the popular demand for outrageous stimulation in literature. He also, like Bunyan, believed that ordinary experiences and objects could be signs of an invisible force, Nature or God, moving beneath, a supernaturalism within the natural.

There are many such extraordinarily-treated ordinary





experiences in Grace Abounding and The Prelude. The game of cat, the encounters with the wicked old woman, the good women of Bedford, the old companion and the Antient Christian, the bell-ringing fright, the attempt to perform a miracle on horse-puddles, the occasion of his wife's labour and the numerous times that scriptural phrases appear in his mind are the most striking in Bunyan. Wordsworth deals with boyhood adventures such as plundering birds' nests, stealing a boat, skating and with the experiences of maturer days, such as the dedication to poetry, the meeting with the old soldier, the dream of the Arab-Quixote, the drowned man, the hungry girl, Robespierre's death and the climb of Mount Snowdon. I shall examine but four of these incidents from the earlier stages of both autobiographies: Bunyan's game of cat and his bell-ringing, and Wordsworth's exploits as a plunderer of birds and a pilferer of boats. These examples are not necessarily those which exhibit characteristics common throughout the autobiographies; they are, however, some of the most effective episodes. All of them occur when the authors are operating on a fairly primitive spiritual level. They involve simple acts, simple physical threats and relatively simple reactions, without the added complexity of more sophisticated poetic and theological problems which later come into play. It is at this primary stage of development that the experiences which Bunyan feels are worthy of documentation most resemble those Wordsworth chooses.



Early in Bunyan's spiritual progress he experiences a number of incidents intended to cure him of his outward wickedness. The first of these occurs while he plays at Cat:<sup>6</sup>

22. But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game of Cat, and having struck it one blow from the hole; just as I was about to strike it the second time, a voice did suddenly dart from Heaven into my Soul, which said, Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to Heaven? or have thy sins, and go to Hell? At this I was put into an exceeding maze; wherefore, leaving my Cat upon the ground, I looked up to Heaven, and was as if I had with the eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me with some grievous punishment for these, and other my ungodly practices.

23. I had no sooner thus conceived in my mind, but suddenly this conclusion was fastened on my spirit (for the former hint did set my sins again before my face) That I had been a great and grievous Sinner, and that it was now too late for me to look after Heaven; for Christ would not forgive me, nor pardon my transgressions. Then I fell to musing upon this also; and while I was thinking on it, and fearing lest it should be so, I felt my heart sink in despair, concluding it was too late; and therefore resolved in my mind I would go on in sin: for thought I, if the case be thus, my state is surely miserable; as miserable if I leave my sins; and but miserable if I follow them: I can but be damned for many sins, as be damned for few.

24. Thus I stood in the middle of my play, before all that then were present; but yet I told them nothing: but, I say, I having made this conclusion, I returned desperately to my sport again; and I well remember, that presently this kind of despair did so possess my Soul, that I was perswaded I could never attain to other comfort then what I should get in sin.

( pp.10-11)

This episode takes place on two different planes at once, the spiritual and the physical, and Bunyan is careful to make his reader aware of both. No matter how deeply Bunyan recedes into



the corners of his conscious mind, glimpses of the street and the game and his companions are sprinkled into the narrative often enough to anchor the event in its spatial and temporal location. Indeed, more environmental details are provided than are absolutely necessary. The game takes place on the same day as a distressing sermon. The exact moment during the game in which the first sentence breaks in upon him is pinned down; he has just "struck it one blow from the hole" and is about to strike again. He takes time during his initial spiritual assault to inform the reader that he places the Cat on the ground. He returns to the game after he has reasoned his response and at that point draws attention to his situation yet again, suggesting that his companions knew nothing of what had happened. All of these details together do not present a complete picture of Bunyan's environment, but enough is suggested to allow the reader a good sense of what is happening. It is really a rather comical scene, with the fellow-gamesters surrounding the player who is lost in thought, all of them ignorant of the fact that God is communicating with one in their midst. Bunyan may not have intended the comedy, but the complete separation between himself and his cronies which this scene establishes is essential. He is in isolation even in a group, and God speaks to him in what is a symbolic election process.

Within the physical framework of this episode the actual spiritual experience takes relatively little time.







Bunyan impresses the speed with which the words came to him with the phrase "did suddenly dart." He reacts almost simultaneously with the invasion of the words, stating, "at this I was put into an exceeding maze." The next section opens with a phrase intended to emphasize the timing involved, as he had "no sooner" imagined an angry Christ "but suddenly" a conclusion "fastned" on his spirit. The entire first part of the experience, then, happens with light speed, like a slap in the face which takes the dumbfounded Bunyan by surprise.

Bunyan is indeed remarkably passive through much of this episode. He experiences a metaphorical holy war in which his soul, heart and spirit are assaulted by an outside force. The voice "darts" into his soul. He was "put into" a "maze" and the conclusion was "fastned" on his spirit. He "fell" into musing and "felt" his heart sink in despair, a despair which "possessed" his soul. When he gave up all hope of salvation he did not decide to transgress, he "found" within himself a great desire to sin, as if it were placed there by someone else. Bunyan, it seems, has no real control, all is done to him. The speed of the incident and the passivity of the victim, then, work to emphasize the explosive intensity of the experience.

Wordsworth's early experiences in his natural surroundings are ostensibly quite removed from Bunyan's urban escapades. Both, however, attribute great importance to what would seem to their companions insignificant, and both are



overwhelmed by guilt for actions which appear nothing more than childish mischief:

Ere I had told  
 Ten birthdays, when among the mountain slopes  
 Frost, and the breath of frosty wind, had snapped  
 The last autumnal crocus, 'twas my joy  
 To range the open heights where woodcocks run  
 Along the smooth green turf. Through half the night,  
 Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied  
 That anxious visitation; - moon and stars  
 Were shining o'er my head. I was alone,  
 And seemed to be a trouble to the peace  
 That dwelt among them. Sometimes it befel  
 In these night wanderings, that a strong desire  
 O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird  
 Which was the captive of another's toil  
 Became my prey; and when the deed was done  
 I heard among the solitary hills  
 Low breathings coming after me, and sounds  
 Of indistinguishable motions, steps  
 Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

(I.301-25)

This is not a single incident but a repeated one. The detail is therefore less particular; the mountain frost and autumnal crocuses create atmosphere, not specificity. Wordsworth is also completely alone, not in a group as Bunyan is. The isolation, however, has the same effect; both men undergo intensely personal and deeply disturbing experiences for which they alone are chosen. Isolation does in fact increase their feelings of responsibility and thus heightens the impact of the incident.

It is in the nature of the crimes committed and the activity of conscience as a result which is both most interesting and most similar in the two passages. There is in both an almost



frenzied will to transgress. Compulsive behavior in The Prelude is yet more apparent in the 1805 version of the incident:

On the heights  
 Scuddling away from snare to snare, I plied  
 My anxious visitation, hurrying on,  
 Still hurrying, hurrying onward. 7

The young Wordsworth recognises that he is a "trouble to the peace" around him, and he feels the threat of the "low breathings" and yet he repeats the action. His is a desire without reason, and the act itself becomes secondary to the satisfaction of that desire. It is sin with knowledge of the sin, sin for its own sake, much like Bunyan's decision to follow a life of vice. In both cases a kind of spiritual acrophobia is involved, with the terrible fear of sin translating easily into desire.<sup>8</sup>

There is a precedent for this kind of experience in Augustine's Confessions:

Thy law indeed doth punish theft, O Lord,  
 and this is written in the hearts of men, which  
 sin itself cannot blot out. For what thief will  
 endure another man that is a thief? Nay, a rich  
 thief will not excuse another man that steals,  
 though he be urged by want. Yet I must needs  
 commit a theft; and I performed it not constrained  
 thereto by any misery or penury, but through a  
 weariness of doing well and by an abundance of  
 iniquity. For I stole that which I had at home  
 both in greater plenty and much better. Neither  
 cared I to enjoy that which I stole; but took  
 pleasure in the very theft and sin itself.

A pear tree there was near our vineyard laden  
 with fruit, which tempted not greatly the sight  
 or the taste. To the shaking and robbing thereof  
 certain most wicked youths, of whom I was one,





went at dead of night; for until then, according to our lewd custom, we had prolonged our horse-play in the open streets. We carried away thence huge burdens of fruit, not for our own eating but to be cast before the hogs; and, if we did taste thereof at all, it was not for any reason so much as because we would do that which was unlawful.

Behold my heart, O my God, behold my heart, whereon thou hadst mercy whilst yet it was even in the lowest depths. Behold now, let my heart confess to thee ~~what~~ it meant to seek in this theft; whilst I was wicked to no purpose, and there was no cause of this my malice but malice itself. It was deformed, and yet I loved it; I loved to perish. I loved the sin, not that which I obtained by the same; I loved the sin itself. And my deformed sin, springing away from the security that is in thee, was abandoned to a total ruin; not desiring any profit from my shame, but only thirsting after shame itself. 9

Augustine is both guilt-ridden and intensely curious about his obsessive desire to sin as a youth; he dedicates the last six chapters of Book II to the problem, but fails to reach a satisfactory understanding of his own motives.

What Bunyan, Wordsworth and Augustine describe in such grave terms would not seem uncommon to many parents of adolescents. Figures of authority become enemies and rebellion without reason is a favorite pastime. In a recent book on authority, Richard Sennett identifies an emotional bond with authority which paradoxically thrives on recognition.<sup>10</sup> Although he writes of twentieth-century familial relationships, his points may have some application here. Compulsive disobedience stems, he suggests, from fear of what the superior can and might do with his power.<sup>11</sup> The dependant desires knowledge of the requirements of the authority, and yet he chooses an opposite



course of action.

Perhaps this is the best explanation for Bunyan's will to sin. He recognises the vast importance of that which faces him; the Almighty God has chosen to speak to him. He understands that God has power over his temporal and his eternal life. In his need for physical representation of spiritual experience he actually looks to heaven and with the eyes of his understanding imagines a very annoyed Christ staring back. Guilt and fear overcome him, and ignoring the fact that the voice asked a question with two possible replies, he starts down the path he desperately does not want.

Wordsworth, too, recognises the power of the force he upsets. In the verse paragraph which immediately follows the account of his bird-stealing, he is shown almost wholly at the mercy of his natural environment:

Nor less when spring had warmed the cultured Vale,  
 Moved we as plunderers where the mother-bird  
 Had in high places built her lodge; though mean  
 Our object and inglorious, yet the end  
 Was not ignoble. Oh! when I have hung  
 Above the ravens' nest, by knots of grass  
 And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock  
 But ill-sustained, and almost (so it seemed)  
 Suspended by the blast that blew amain,  
 Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time  
 While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,  
 With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind  
 Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky  
 Of earth - and with what motion moved the clouds!

(I.326-39)

His fear and the knowledge of his guilt in the face of a potent



natural authority evokes in his mind images of life-threatening forces surrounding him or following him.

Imagination, with the power to transform fear and guilt into terrifying images, is what distinguishes the experiences of Bunyan and Wordsworth even from Saint Augustine. Augustine is troubled with his crime only in retrospect; there is no suggestion of remorse or fear when the act took place. In fact, his actual state of mind at the time of the theft seems of relatively little importance as it is barely mentioned. Bunyan's terror is clear to his audience. It is his imagination which creates the angry Christ on high and which transforms the incident into evidence of damnation, along with his profound awareness of his own guilt and unworthiness. The threat Wordsworth describes varies from Bunyan's in that it is rather more vague. He seems to strive for a passage which will both suggest presence and absence; the sounds coming after him were "of indistinguishable motion" and the steps "almost as silent as the turf they trod," and yet he perceived them. The vagueness does not inhibit intensity, however. Wordsworth creates as effective an atmosphere of fear as Bunyan, but while Bunyan deals with a sudden, gripping terror, Wordsworth's fear surrounds and pervades. Both exhibit depth of feeling and imagination which allow their isolated moments of time to grip their audiences.

The power of guilt and imagination is yet more strikingly evident in the passages which closely follow the game of cat and the "low breathings." Bunyan finds himself on the road to







reformation soon after his fright while gambling, and he believes it seemly to abandon some of his more sensual pleasures:

33. Now you must know, that before this I had taken much delight in ringing, but my Conscience beginning to be tender, I thought that such a practice was but vain, and therefore forced my self to leave it, yet my mind hankerred, wherefore I should go to the Steeple house, and look on: though I durst not ring. But I thought this did not become Religion neither, yet I forced my self and would look on still; but quickly after, I began to think, How, if one of the Bells should fall: then I chose to stand under a main Beam that lay over thwart the Steeple from side to side, thinking there I might stand sure: But then I should think again, Should the Bell fall with a swing, it might first hit the Wall, and then rebounding on me, might kill me for all this Beam; this made me stand in the Steeple door, and now thought, I am safe enough, for if a Bell should then fall, I can slip out behind these thick Walls, and so be preserved notwithstanding.

34. So after this, I would yet go to see them ring, but would not go further than the Steeple door; but then it came into my head, how if the Steeple itself should fall, and this thought, (it may fall for ought I know) would when I stood and looked on, continually so shake my mind, that I durst not stand at the Steeple door any longer, but was forced to fly, for fear it should fall upon my head.

(pp.13-14)

Here is the perfect example of the great conflict between desire on the one hand and Conscience on the other. The desire seems a strange one; bell-ringing is rarely regarded as a heinous crime. For a century accustomed to amplified sounds bell-ringing may not seem an exercise in sensual excess, but it was undoubtedly the loudest noise to which Bunyan could be exposed. He enjoyed, then, gorging his aural sense and realised quite rightly the danger such an excess could pose. All the senses were potential



portals for the invasion of sin, as Bunyan makes clear in his allegorical Holy War.<sup>12</sup> The inner sense, the Conscience, was alone to be trusted.

Bunyan's Conscience begins battle with the physical senses. The opposition established at the outset is maintained throughout, and so lends the passage a marvelously even structure. Bunyan is caught between the two sides, and as he attempts to appease one, the other retaliates. This occurs in three stages: he will look and not ring, but the bell might fall on him; he will stand under the protection of a beam but the bell might still rebound on him; and finally, he will stand in the steeple door, but the whole steeple might fall. Conscience wins in the end and Bunyan is "forced to flee, for fear it should fall" on his head, as he says in that lovely alliterative last line.

Bunyan's attempt to reconcile desire and Conscience resembles another episode from Augustine's Confessions, but here the victim is not the author but a student of the author:

He Alipius, therefore, since he forsook not that wordly course which his parents had inculcated him, went before me to Rome that he might study Law, and there he was carried away with an incredible appetite for the fights of gladiators; is it not incredible? For when at first he was utterly averse to and detesting such spectacles as those, certain friends and fellow students of his, coming casually upon him one day after dinner, did conduct him, with a kind of friendly violence, to the amphitheatre, at a time when those tragical and deadly pastimes were being presented, he the while protesting thus: "Though you drag my body thither to that place, shall you therefore be able to make me open my eyes and apply my mind to those spectacles? No, but I will be absent, even while I am present, and so I will conquer





both them and you." Whereupon they were not the less slow to lead him on, perhaps out of a kind of curiosity to know whether he could be as good as his word. They arrived therefore, and took what places they could find, just as that whole world was seething with the wildest excitement.

Alipius shut the windows of his eyes and forbade his mind to mingle with those crimes. Would to God he had stopped his ears also! For, by occasion of some turn in the fight, a deafening shout of the people burst forth about him, and - being overcome with curiosity, and resolved, whatsoever it was, to despise it when seen and to overcome it - he opened his eyes. Then he was stricken with a deeper wound in his soul than the other was in his body, and he fell more miserably than the poor wretch who he desired to behold, and upon whose fall that cry had been made; that cry which entered his ears and unlocked his eyes, that a way might be made for the wounding and defeating of his soul, which was bold rather than valiant, and so much the weaker for that he trusted upon himself, who ought to have confided only in thee. For as soon as he beheld that blood he drank down with it a kind of savageness; he did not now turn away but fastened his gaze upon it, and drinking up the cup of fury ere he knew it, he became enamoured with the wickedness of those combats, and drunk with a delight in blood. 13

The moral of the story is you must not trust yourself not to sin in an environment of wickedness; the senses are too strong.<sup>14</sup>

Alipius is constrained by his fellows, and so, unlike Bunyan, is unable to flee the sight. He, too, believes that the blocking out of one sense will save him, however, and he experiences the same battle between desire and conscience. In his psychomachia, desire wins.

Bunyan's account is more interesting and engaging than Augustine's. The description of the cry which rises from the amphitheatre audience and causes Alipius to suddenly unlock his eyes and from abstention turn to obsession with the blood-sport is certainly moving. It does, however, lack the personal





tone of an autobiographical incident. Even more than this, Bunyan infuses his passage with a supernatural quality which heightens the impact of the experience. Bunyan believes that he holds the power to wreak disaster upon himself by indulgence in sin. The disaster is specific; the bell, the object of his desire, will somehow kill him. It is, I suppose, a kind of extreme superstition, of the sort perhaps best compared to those held by sailors or mountain climbers. In these cases and in Bunyan's the humans involved are at the mercy of a very powerful force, and with such a dependence comes the obsessive desire to know what that force wishes. If a ship is launched on Friday the thirteenth it will sink, if a climber sets out to conquer a mountain he will die; and if Bunyan has anything to do with bell-ringing, the bell or even the steeple will fall. The extent of the damage Bunyan can do does in fact increase as he retreats further from the bell itself. The power of his conscience coupled with imagination makes the fear grow as the sin lessens and the tension suggests greater and greater punishments.

Bunyan's imagination in this passage is remarkable. Not only does it allow him to invent punishments which fit the crime, punishments terrible enough to force him to flee, but it also works out for him marvelously crafty excuses with which he intends to satisfy his desire and his Conscience. As with the punishments, the complexity of these excuses increases with every stage in the struggle. He will stand



under "the main Beam that lay over thwart the Steeple from side to side" for protection, and one can imagine him standing under that beam and suddenly realising that the bell could "fall with a swing" and kill him anyway: God can still get him. The steeple door is the next point of refuge; he clearly puts some thought into this option, reasoning he could "slip out behind these thick Walls" should the bell fall at any angle. The detailed reasoning behind these somewhat absurd resolves is remarkable. If one believes it is based on unfounded superstition then the intellectual effort is wasted and the anxiety behind it pointless. If one does believe God might use such punishments, then Bunyan's attempt to escape them is also fruitless; if the all-powerful God wishes to crush a sinner no amount of hiding under beams or behind doors will stop him.

Once again, then, Bunyan attempts to reject authority. As he does so in stages it may not seem a dangerous rebellion, but the more he persists against God and against his conscience the greater a rebellion it becomes. His conclusion is that God's law may not be bargained with and it is the colouring of imagination over the situation which plants this conclusion so firmly in his mind.

The strength of Wordsworth's imagination as a young boy is what has distinguished the boat-stealing episode in The Prelude. I quote the passage in full:



One summer evening (led by her) I found  
 A little boat tied to a willow tree  
 Within a rocky cave, its usual home.  
 Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in  
 Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth  
 And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice  
 Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;  
 Leaving behind her still, on either side,  
 Small circles glittered idly in the moon,  
 Until they melted all into one track  
 Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,  
 Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point  
 With an unswerving line, I fixed my view  
 Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,  
 The horizon's utmost boundary; far above  
 Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.  
 She was an elfin pinnacle; lustily  
 I dipped my oars into the silent lake,  
 And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat  
 Went heaving through the water like a swan;  
 When, from behind that craggy steep till then  
 The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,  
 As if with voluntary power instinct  
 Uproared its head. I struck and struck again,  
 And growing still in stature the grim shape  
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,  
 For so it seemed, with purpose of its own  
 And measured motion like a living thing,  
 Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,  
 And through the silent water stole my way  
 Back to the covert of the willow tree;  
 There in her mooring-place I left my bark, -  
 And through the meadows homeward went, in grave  
 And serious mood; but after I had seen  
 That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
 Worked with a dim and undetermined sense  
 Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts  
 There hung a darkness, call it solitude  
 Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes  
 Remained, no pleasant images of trees,  
 Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;  
 But huge and mighty forms, that do no live  
 Like living men, moved slowly through the mind  
 By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

( I.357-400)

Here, as in the bell-ringing, cat-playing and bird-stealing  
 incidents, imagination aroused by intense feelings of guilt,







transforms an otherwise ordinary situation into an extraordinary one. Robert Langbaum explains the incident as follows:

The revelation proceeds from an optical illusion which, by disrupting the ordinary appearance of things, allows the imagination to transform them into significance. The effect of the revelation is to make them feel that so extraordinary a perspective is no less true to the reality of the object than an ordinary perspective, that is even in a sense truer. 15

It is true that the perspective created by the power of Wordsworth's imagination is made to appear as true as the ordinary perspective, but it is not necessarily an "optical illusion" from which the revelation proceeds. Frank McConnell in a recent book on The Prelude defends the reality of the vision:

As he gets farther and farther from the shore, his view of "the horizon's utmost boundary" becomes more panoramic, and the black peak begins to appear over the craggy ridge. It is huge, growing still in stature not in itself but precisely in relation to the ridge on which the rower has taken a fix. Far from being . . . a violation of natural perspective, this is an effect so common as to be normally unnoticeable. 16

This, it seems to me, is quite right. Also, the fact that when rowing one moves not with uniform speed but with one lunge forward followed by a lull as the oars move through the air accounts for the appearance of the peak striding after him rather than growing uniformly. Perhaps the one difficulty with the passage is Wordsworth's assertion that the peak "towered up" between himself and the stars. It would be impossible for the peak actually to block out the night sky,



but Wordsworth states, "I fixed my view / Upon the summit of a craggy ridge, / The horizon's utmost boundary." and as he retreats the clear line between craggy ridge and stars would be obstructed by the peak. Thus the environment Wordsworth describes is a natural one.

What is not natural is the way in which Wordsworth interprets what he sees. He understands that he does wrong and he enjoys only a "troubled pleasure." As he begins to row evidence of his transgression is imprinted on his natural surroundings; "mountain-echoes" and "small circles" are audible and visual traces of his path. He introduces discord and his acknowledgement of this discord causes him to suspect Nature's retribution when the peak first appears. His own motion increases the size of the peak but it seems to him to grow "as if with voluntary power instinct." The farther away he moves and the longer he persists in his "act of stealth" the greater the threat becomes. This greatly resembles Bunyan's experience; the threat from the falling bell became more terrible as he continued to reason against God. And as in Bunyan's experience, Wordsworth's escape from the steady growth of tension is flight; in this case the flight involves turning his back on the terrible vision and returning whence he came. Sudden release, then, follows mounting anxiety.

It is a strong temptation to dismiss the extraordinary experiences of Bunyan and Wordsworth as the products of deluded or even diseased minds. William James, for instance, despite



some useful comments on the verbal automatisms to which Bunyan falls prey, calls the author of Grace Abounding "a typical case of the psychopathic temperament."<sup>17</sup> Roger Sharrock denies this, and insists that to understand Bunyan we must accept him on his own terms:

The saints and mystics are not psychopathological cases, each enclosed in a private universe of illusion, nor even delightful eccentrics. Bunyan's good and evil are our good and evil, however harsh and strange the shapes of damnation and election which his vision assumes. What does mark him off is the plunge into faith that he makes.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the transformation of ordinary objects into signs of a superior power takes place solely in the mind of the beholder is not to be wondered at. If these two ask that their audience accept one thing in their autobiographies it is their election. Election, theological or poetic, allows a clearer insight into the world around them. To then dismiss their perceptions as mental illness or even as simple nonsense is to betray oneself as reprobate, ignorant, a natural man. What these two autobiographies describe is at a very basic level feelings and fears common to all of humanity. What separates Bunyan and Wordsworth from most of their fellows is their stronger imaginative powers, the result of election, which probes those feelings and fears until they seem uncommon. The "certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things are presented to the mind in an unusual aspect," then, not only explores the powers behind ordinary things, but also reaffirms the election of the autobiographer.<sup>19</sup>







#### Chapter IV: Simple Diction

The ability to communicate spiritual experiences to others in a meaningful and delightful way is part of the gift with which Bunyan and Wordsworth are entrusted. They are, therefore, both concerned that they determine and employ a style answerable to the fulfillment of their responsibilities. As both intend to present ordinary objects or events in an extraordinary light, one might expect that their language would need to be in some way extraordinary. It is, however, simple speech for which Bunyan and Wordsworth strive, and for two reasons: first, the matter they consider is of great spiritual importance which would only be obstructed by excessive ornamentation; and second, simple words on their own may take on powers and influence so great as to be almost independent of their meaning. This stylistic ideal of simplicity applies not only to the two autobiographies, but also to all of Bunyan's allegories, treatises and sermons, and to the body of Wordsworth's poetry, even though the two men may occasionally have fallen short of that ideal. It is, in fact, the intention rather than the practice of style which shows a relationship between Bunyan and Wordsworth, and it is therefore that intention which will here be of interest.

It is in the "Preface" to Grace Abounding that Bunyan



makes one of his clearest statements on style:

I could have enlarged much in this my discourse of my temptations and troubles for sin, and also of the merciful kindness and working of God with my Soul: I could also have stepped into a stile much higher then this which I have here discoursed, and could have adorned all things more then here I have seemed to do: but I dare not: God did not play in convincing of me; the Devil did not play in tempting of me; neither did I play when I sunk as into a bottomless pit, when the pangs of hell caught hold upon me: wherefore I may not play in my relating of them, but be plain and simple, and lay down the thing as it was.

( pp.3-4 )

To explain a spiritual experience with embellishment or exaggeration would, as Bunyan suggests here, render that account as false as had the experience itself been fabricated. An autobiographer or preacher would, by affecting an artificially elevated style, "play" with the truths which God reveals. An experience must, then, as far as possible be presented "as it was."

The warnings against embellishments, particularly in preaching, were many in Puritan England. William Perkins warns his fellow ministers that they must not "tickle the itchy ears of his auditors with the fine ringing sentences of the Fathers" but must "observe an admirable plainnesse and an admirable powerfullnesse."<sup>1</sup> The unlearned sinner would in this manner grasp with greater ease the meaning of the Scriptures and would be led sooner to salvation. The ministry of John Dodd was said to be "so spiritual, and yet so plain,



that poor simple people that never knew what Religion meant, when they had gone to hear him, could not chose but talk of his Sermon.<sup>2</sup> A plain style, then, is that which will reach the understanding of the greatest number.

A demonstration of verbal cleverness or learnedness would not, however, aid in the understanding of other learned men either, as Perkins suggests:

"Humane wisdom" must be concealed, whether it be in the matter of the sermon, or in the setting forth of the words: because the preaching of the word is the "Testamonie of God and the profession of the knowledge of Christ", and not of humane skill. <sup>3</sup>

That the limitations of "humane wisdom" could obstruct the higher spiritual matters with which a Christian should be concerned was clear to Bunyan as well. A "Preface to the Reader" before one of his treatises explains that all men, no matter how gifted or good, suffer the inability to retain in their minds the true form of God's word:

Gentle Reader,

It was the great care of the apostle Paul to deliver his gospel to the churches in its own simplicity, because so is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. And if it was his care so to deliver it to us it should be ours to seek so to continue it; and the rather, because of the unaptness of the minds, even of the saints themselves, to retain it without commixture. For, to say nothing of the projects of hell, and of the cunning craftiness of some that lie in wait to deceive even the godly themselves, as they are dull of hearing, so much more dull in receiving and holding fast the simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. From their sense, and reason, and unbelief, and darkness, arise many imaginations





and high thoughts, which exalt themselves against the knowledge of God and the obedience of Jesus Christ, wherefore they themselves have much ado to stand complete in all the will of God. 4

Man must not trust his mind to add his own "high thoughts" to the scriptures because of his fallen nature. Owen Watkins explains the confusion of elements within postlapsarian man:

Reason, as the king of the faculties, should be in control, acting with the will to rule the affections; but in fallen man both the will and the affections are in revolt, while reason itself is imperfect. Thus the affections act independently to forestall reason, which itself is misled by the corrupted imagination; and the dominant activity of the will is to command the reason to provide excuses for self-justification and continued rebellion against God. 5

Thus in autobiography, epistles or preaching, the employment of any but plain and unembellished style would lead to a human interference with divine matters, an obstruction of the purity of the experience or the doctrine intended for communication. Bunyan writes in another treatise of God's word as the "water of Life" and urges his readers to partake of it but with this warning: "if thou wouldst drink it, drink it by itself, and that thou mayst not be deceived by that which is counterfeit, know it as it comes from the hand of our Lord, without mixture, pure and clear as crystal."<sup>6</sup> He speaks of "mountebanks" who pretend to sell that water, humans who would concoct their own spiritual potion and pass it off as the Lord's but insists that for the real thing one must go to God himself. The "excellent quality and nature" of the water is inexpressible



"by the pen or tongue of men or angels." <sup>7</sup>

Man must as far as possible be true to the quality of his experience by the use of plain and trustworthy language, and therefore as a corollary to this directive, he should avoid imitation. In his account of his ministry, Bunyan denies this fault in himself, but without pronouncing it a wholly damnable flaw:

285. I never endeavoured to, nor durst make use of other men's lines, Rom. 15.18, (though I condemn not all that do) for I verily thought, and found by experience, that what was taught me by the Word and Spirit of Christ, could be spoken, maintained, and stood to, by the soundest and best established Conscience.

(p.88)

The treatise "The Acceptable Sacrifice," published posthumously, contains a preface by George Cokayne which praises Bunyan for his adherence to personal experience:

The Author of the ensuing Discourse (Now with God . . .) did experience in himself, through the grace of God, the nature, excellency, and comfort of a truly broken and contrite spirit so that what is here written is but a transcript out of his own heart. <sup>8</sup>

Once again, then, what these passages urge is a faithful and unhindered transmission, from one person to a group of people, of a spiritual experience revealed by God to the heart of one of His elect. The plain and simple truth comes as if unaided from God through his servant to his people.



Almost one hundred and fifty years after the sermons of Bunyan and his fellow ministers had been delivered, Wordsworth developed a poetic theory remarkably similar to the Puritan ideals of expression. There was no longer a great concern for the God whose message or Word was to be passed on to others, nor was there the anxious belief in the essential pollution of man's mind which would necessarily hinder a human discovery of truth. There was, however, a concern that the purity of experience or truth which the poet apprehended be preserved as far as possible "as it was." There was also the belief that this would best be achieved at a simple stylistic level. Wordsworth set out to determine and employ "a selection of language really used by men" for reasons which he explains in the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads:<sup>9</sup>

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated. 10

Just as with Bunyan, who aims for as little interference as possible between the heart which receives the message or experience and the transmission of that message to others, Wordsworth chooses rustic life because of the lack of restraint between the passions of the heart and the expression of those passions in that condition. The purity of the experience,





then, is for the most part preserved, as he goes on to suggest:

The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislide or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. 11

The language of rural and uneducated England, then, being closer to the essence of the truths of life and the natural world, will be better suited to the communication of those truths than will the convoluted speech of the city. It is less a desire for decorum, for the style to suit the nature of the matter, and more the belief that what is generally thought to be "low" speech will be the most effective in dealing with matters of greatest importance. Urban, educated language is Wordsworth's equivalent to the Puritan's "humane wisdom;" neither maintains close contact with spiritual truths, so neither is appropriate for a consideration of such truths. They may only detract from the purity of experience by drawing attention to their own complexity.

While Wordsworth's intention may be clear, there remains some question as to his success. He is not himself a rustic: his education, experience and social standing have opened to him a larger circle of intercourse than that enjoyed by the common man. He may, therefore, merely "adopt" their language.



As well, he writes poetry, a genre which requires that language be, if not convoluted, at least concentrated. Poetry should by its nature always exceed the prose which flows from the mouths of everyday men in everyday situations. The poet Wordsworth does not, however, profess to be an ordinary man. He is a man who, being "possessed of more than usual organic sensibility," has "thought long and deeply" on his subject.<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth will not fail, then, if his poems contain language or thoughts which surpass the natural ability of men of the soil: he will fail if they do not. He writes in the "Preface" that his poetry would use "as far as was possible . . . a selection of language really used by men" (emphasis added) and the qualification is important.<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth has suggested a direction for his style rather than an absolute standard by which it is to be judged.

The Puritan spiritual autobiography has the distinction of being an entire body of literature written by the very rustic and humble types Wordsworth sought to imitate. Bunyan himself, though the product of some limited education, was a tinker by trade and one of a group of so-called "mechanick preachers" whose ministries were denounced for lack of formal theological training.<sup>14</sup> There are still, however, examples in Bunyan which apparently violate the rules of plainness and simplicity. There is, for instance, a decided predilection for metaphor. In the very passage in Grace Abounding which insists that an experience be laid down "as it was" he states in a marvelously evocative



phrase, "neither did I play when I sunk as into a bottomless pit, when the pangs of hell caught hold upon me" (p.3). The force of many of his personal accounts does in fact depend upon metaphor or simile, as when he feels God gives him up in wrath "as with a mighty whirlwind" (p.32), or when he feels the devil pull at his clothes (p.34), or in the violent passages as when he feels his torment would "flame out and afflict" him and grind him "as it were to powder" (p.47). Bunyan needs to express his spiritual experiences in physical terms. A good example of this is the two passages in which he describes his encounter with the good women of Bedford. In the first he presents what actually happens, where he sees the women, what he hears and how he is affected. The second passage, a visionary reconstruction of the first, shows Bunyan on the cold side of a mountain, the good people of Bedford on the warm, sunny side, and one narrow gap through which Bunyan must struggle to join the others. This is not a plain and simple presentation of experience, but an allegorical recreation of it intended to aid in the reader's understanding. Bunyan's best known works are allegories which he acknowledges are "dark," but he defends their use, saying, "was not God's Laws, / His Gospel-laws in olden time held forth / By Types, Shadows and Metaphors?"<sup>15</sup> With God as his example, Bunyan presents allegory as an effective and acceptable means by which to further an understanding of spiritual matters. Plainness was encouraged in principle, then, but as Owen Watkins suggests, eloquence







could be used to make logic or the plain truth more persuasive, as long as it was not eloquence for its own sake.<sup>16</sup>

There is another instance in which Bunyan seems to encourage one goal in style, and yet practices another, and this involves the use of Scripture. He insists that he does not imitate "other men's lines" in his sermons, and yet that very line makes reference to Romans 15.18. Scripture is, of course, not regarded as the words of other men, but as the Word of God, and thus occupies a special position. For the Puritan in particular Scripture is the ultimate source of man's knowledge of God. As such, individual passages do, after constant repetition in the sinner's mind, take on a life and power of their own. Words become vital elements, then, in the Puritan mind.

The power of words, either to damn or to save, is exhibited in Grace Abounding by what William James calls "verbal automatisms."<sup>17</sup> A phrase will seem to assault Bunyan's consciousness of its own accord, and he is as powerless to dismiss it as he is to summon it back. His lack of control is demonstrated in a battle between two scriptural passages:

212. And I remember one day, as I was in diverse frames of Spirit, and considering that these frames were still according to the nature of several Scriptures that came in upon my mind; if this of Grace, then I was quiet; but if that of Esau, then tormented. Lord, thought I, if both these Scriptures would meet in my heart at once, I wonder which of them would get the better of me. So me thought I had a longing mind that they might both come together upon me; yea, I desired of God they might.



213. Well, about two or three dayes after, so they did indeed; they boulded both upon me at a time, and did work and struggle strangely in me for a while; at last, that about Esau began to wax weak, and withdraw and vanish; and this about the sufficiency of Grace prevailed, with peace and joy.

(pp.66-7)

Bunyan recognises that such a confrontation is necessary to the relief of his soul, and yet he is unable to will them together simply by thinking the words; he is forced to wait patiently until the phrases do themselves independently enter his mind.

Another curious incident involving an apparently capricious scripture takes place when the words "My grace is sufficient" appear to Bunyan, and yet provide only temporary comfort until the phrase is complete:

Yet, because "for thee" was left out, I was not contented, but prayed to God for that also: Wherefore, one day as I was in a Meeting of God's People, full of sadness and terrour, . . . these words did with great power suddainly break in upon me, "My grace is sufficient for thee, my grace is sufficient for thee, my grace is sufficient for thee;" three times together; and, O me - thought that every word was a mighty word unto me; as "my," and "grace," and "sufficient," and "for thee;" they were then, and sometimes are still, far bigger than others be.

( p.65 )

Watkins efficiently explains the impact that these words have on Bunyan:



In Bunyan's story, then, the Scripture is more than simply a medium of revelation; it assumes the role of a protagonist with whom he argues and struggles and which has a complex life of its own: mysterious, powerful, unpredictable, searching him out with desolating efficiency, but ultimately consistent and working for his good. It is a strange, almost personified force, and it is a measure of Bunyan's commitment that his dealings with them are almost as dramatic as those with Satan himself. 18

Given his belief in the power of words in a scriptural context, it is no wonder that Bunyan also recognises and respects the power which his own language may have over others. He searches for such power in his preaching:

272. And I thank God he gave unto me some measure of bowels and pity for their Souls, which also did put me forward to labour with great diligence and earnestness to find out such a Word as might, if God would bless it, lay hold of and awaken the Conscience.

( p.84 )

His own words, then, may with God's help assault the souls of his audience as the scriptural passages assaulted his own in order to lead him to salvation.

James Sutherland, in an effort to make that very point about Bunyan and words, uses the following passage as an illustration:

Words are too awful an instrument of good and evil to be trifled with; they hold above all other eternal powers a domination over thoughts. If words be not . . . an incarnation of the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift. 19





What makes this quotation of particular interest here is that it comes not from Bunyan, but from an essay by Wordsworth. This "domination over thoughts" which Wordsworth insists is a power of words certainly explains Bunyan's wrangling with scripture, and it also makes clear that Wordsworth shared with Bunyan a Puritanical attitude towards language. Words do no merely transmit or represent, then: they become.

Great sway, then, as well as great responsibility comes to the man endowed with the ability to control and use words. As the means through which the universal truths may be purely and comprehensibly communicated they instruct. As independently vital forces they may capture and move their audience, paving the way for a better understanding of spiritual matters. Bunyan and Wordsworth recognise this power and seek to concentrate and augment it with simple words simply put. Like any gift, however, great responsibility creates the possibility of great failure, and great power to do good brings with it an equally great power and a great temptation to do evil. In choosing to employ a plain style, Bunyan and Wordsworth impress upon their readers a dedication to their assigned vocations.



## Conclusion

Bunyan and Wordsworth, when writing their autobiographies, are involved in analysis and interpretation. They approach their own lives as a careful reader approaches a text; it is assumed that an omniscient Author has arranged significant details in a significant pattern in order to convey a message. Experiences, then, such as the boat-stealing episode or the game of cat, are arranged in a meaningful order, in this case one with conversion, crisis and renewal as its structure, to suggest that the main character, the autobiographer, is in fact "elect;" Bunyan is saved and Wordsworth is rendered capable of a great work. The underlying similarity, then, between the autobiographies of Bunyan and Wordsworth, is that they choose to read the "text" of their lives in the same manner.

The greatest difference between the two autobiographies, if one may continue to employ the same terms, is the nature of the omniscient Author, and here Hulme's objections must once again surface. Does it, in fact, "mess up, falsify, and blur the clear outlines of human experience" to apply the "instincts which find their right and proper or at least original outlet in religion" to a life in which the Puritan God is no longer securely at the helm?<sup>1</sup> The answer, in the



case of The Prelude, must be a strong "no," or if "yes" then the reality of human experience in Grace Abounding must also be called into question. It is as meaningful to suggest that a young boy's faint perception of "low breathings" coming after him reveals a conscious force moving beneath the natural world as it is to believe that a close call with a stray bullet is evidence of the benevolent hand of God. These similar attitudes, applied albeit in different situations, prove as valid in both cases.

Perhaps the last thing left to determine is, given the wide application that the pattern Bunyan and Wordsworth impose on their lives has, to what extent are their instincts common to all men, and particularly to all autobiographers. It has already been established that Bunyan wrote his autobiography within the bounds of a Puritan literary tradition, but even outside such traditions one frequently hears people suggest that experiences, such as a death in the family or a close call in an automobile, are elements in some vast eternal plan. Perhaps it reflects a basic human desire to create order, particularly in their own lives, out of a chaos of circumstances. That Bunyan and Wordsworth reflect this desire does, in fact, commend the relevance of their autobiographies to the rest of humanity. What separates them from their fellows is the intensity of their imagination and the vividness of their language, aspects they would attribute to their freely-given gifts, which perceive more clearly and express





more faithfully the eternal forces which lie concealed  
beneath the surface of human experience.



## Footnotes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup>Robert Bell, "Metamorphosis of Spiritual Autobiography," ELH, 44 (Spring, 1977), 108-126; p.108.

<sup>2</sup>John Morris, Versions of the Self (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p.89.

<sup>3</sup>Anna Trapnel, A Legacy for Saints (1654); George Fox, The Journal of George Fox (1694); Richard Baxter, Reliquiae Baxterianae (1698). There are enlightening commentaries on all three of these in Owen Watkins' The Puritan Experience (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). A quick word of comparison between these three and Bunyan may be useful here. Anna Trapnel was a visionary and was therefore primarily concerned with her prophetic talents. She would, in the midst of an autobiographical lecture, break into singing on occasion, and would need to be helped to her bed, and such public incidents, coupled with her professed prophetic powers make her account somewhat less credible than Bunyan's. George Fox is secure in his own election after conversion, and thus avoids the dynamic inner conflict which makes Grace Abounding so interesting. Baxter does undergo temptation after conversion, but just as Bunyan's fascination with language made him vulnerable to the power of words and phrases, so Baxter's interest in the fundamentals of Christian faith made him vulnerable to doubts about the truth of Christian doctrine.

<sup>4</sup>T.E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," in Speculations, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup>M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), p.68.

<sup>6</sup>John Morris, Versions of the Self (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

<sup>7</sup>J. Crofts, "Wordsworth and the Seventeenth Century," in The Warton Lecture on English Poetry (London: Humphrey Milford Amen House, 1940).

<sup>8</sup>Vincent Newey, "Wordsworth, Bunyan and the Puritan Mind," ELH, 41 (Summer, 1974), 212-32.



## Chapter I: Election

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca S. Beal, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners: Bunyan's Pauline Epistle," SEL, 21 (Winter, 1981), 148-9.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Sharrock, Introd., Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p.xxiii.

<sup>3</sup>John Bunyan, Grace Abounding to the chief of Sinners, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p.2. All future references to this text will appear in the body of the paper by page number alone.

<sup>4</sup>William Wordsworth, The Prelude, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), X.234-6. All future references to this text will be made by book and line number and will appear in the body of the paper. Unless otherwise stated I shall be quoting from the 1850 edition of The Prelude.

<sup>5</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface" to The Excursion, in The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, vol.III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p.5.

<sup>6</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, in The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, vol.I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p.149.

<sup>7</sup>William York Tindall, John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), p.6.

<sup>8</sup>Sharrock's note, Grace Abounding, pp.155-6.

<sup>9</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, p.116.

<sup>10</sup>John Calvin, Institutes, trans. Beveridge, III.21.

<sup>11</sup>Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in Selected Poems and Prefaces, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp.108-111; ll.72-91.

<sup>12</sup>C. Clarke, "Nature's Education of Man: Some Remarks on the Philosophy of Wordsworth," Philosophy, XXIII (1948), 302-316; p.308. Here Clarke speaks of the episodes with the woodcocks and with the stolen boats as examples of early paganism.





<sup>13</sup>Clarke outlines this progression, p.314.

<sup>14</sup>Sharrock, Introd., Grace Abounding, p.xii.

<sup>15</sup>Margaret Bottrall, Every Man a Phoenix (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1958), p.91. Bottrall suggests that although the Thomas Bunyans conformed to the Church of England there is no evidence to suggest that they were or were not pious. Sharrock in his introduction to Grace Abounding cites an entry in the Act Books of the Archdeaconry of Bedford which says that John Bunyan's grandfather, also called Thomas, was presented at the Archdeacon's Court for telling the churchwardens that they were "forsworne men" but whether this was out of Puritan leanings is unclear. Evidence of John Bunyan's religious heritage, then, is suggestive but inconclusive.

<sup>16</sup>Morris, p.94.

## Chapter II: Conversion

<sup>1</sup>Bell, pp.108-9.

<sup>2</sup>Bell, p.109.

<sup>3</sup>Bottrall, p.89-90; Roger Sharrock, "Spiritual Autobiography in The Pilgrim's Progress," RES, 24 (1948), 113-14.

<sup>4</sup>Ola Wilson, John Bunyan (New York: MacMillan, 1961), pp.48-50; Dean Ebner, Autobiography in Seventeenth Century England (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp.58-9.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Greaves, John Bunyan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p.17.

<sup>6</sup>James Thorpe, Introd., The Pilgrim's Progress and Grace Abounding by John Bunyan, Riverside Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), pp.viii-ix.

<sup>7</sup>Anne Hawkins, "The Double Conversion in Bunyan's Grace Abounding," PQ, 61 (Summer, 1982), 259-76; p.262.

<sup>8</sup>Herbert Lindenberger, On Wordsworth's "Prelude" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.56.



<sup>9</sup>Hawkins, p.275.

<sup>10</sup>Hawkins, p.259.

<sup>11</sup>Morris, p.33.

<sup>12</sup>Hawkins, p.266.

<sup>13</sup>Abrams, p.47.

### Chapter III: Experience

<sup>1</sup>Frank M. Towne, "Wordsworth's Spiritual Autobiography," Research Studies of the State College of Washington; XXV (1957), 57-62; p.61.

<sup>2</sup>Isaac Ambrose, Prime, Media and Ultima (London: 1654), II.68.

<sup>3</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, p.123.

<sup>4</sup>Anna Seward, Letters of Anna Seward, vol.VI (Edinburgh: George Ramsey, 1811), p.367.

<sup>5</sup>S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, in Selected Prose and Poetry of Coleridge, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, 1951), chapter XXII, p.339.

<sup>6</sup>Sharrock's note to Grace Abounding: "The game of cat is played with a cudgel. Its denomination is derived from a piece of wood about six inches long, and two inches thick, diminished from the middle to form a double cone. When the cat is placed on the ground a player strikes it smartly - it matters not at which end - and it must rise with a rotary motion high enough for him to strike it. If he misses, another player takes his place. If he hits, he calls for a number to be scored to his game. If that number is more than as many lengths of his cudgel, he is out. If not, they are scored, and he plays again."

<sup>7</sup>Wordsworth, The Prelude, 1805 edition, ed. E. de Selincourt, rev. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), I.311-14.



<sup>8</sup>The term comes from John Morris' Versions of the Self, p.6, and is mentioned in Chapter I of this paper, p.33.

<sup>9</sup>Augustine, Confessions, trans. Sir Toby Matthew, revised Roger Hudleston (London: Burn and Oats, 1923), pp.39-40.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Sennett, Authority (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), p.28.

<sup>11</sup>Sennett, p.33.

<sup>12</sup>The five gates of Mansoul are Eargate, Eyegate, Mouthgate, Nosegate and Eargate and it is through both Ear- and Eyegate that Diabolus first enters the town. The Holy War, ed. James F. Forrest (Toronto: Copp Clarke, 1967), pp. 9 and 19.

<sup>13</sup>Augustine, p.145-6.

<sup>14</sup>Augustine himself lectures on the vulnerability of the senses, Book X, chaps. 31-4.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: W.W.Norton, 1963), p.42.

<sup>16</sup>Frank D. McConnell, The Confessional Imagination (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.92.

<sup>17</sup>William James, Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Longmans, Green and co., 1910), p.157.

<sup>18</sup>Roger Sharrock, John Bunyan (London: Hutchinson, 1954), p.62.

<sup>19</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, p.123.

#### Chapter IV: Diction

<sup>1</sup>William Perkins, The Art of Prophesying in Works (Cambridge, 1609), p.430.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Clarke, The Lives of Thirty-Two English Divines, 3rd ed. (1677), p.177.





<sup>3</sup>Perkins, p.759.

<sup>4</sup>John Bunyan, Light for them that Sit in Darkness (Swengel, Pa: Reiner, 1969), p.iii.

<sup>5</sup>Owen Watkins, The Puritan Experience (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972)

<sup>6</sup>Bunyan, The Water of Life (Swengel, Pa: Reiner, 1967), p.iii.

<sup>7</sup>Bunyan, The Water, p.iii.

<sup>8</sup>George Cokayne, "Preface" to The Acceptable Sacrifice by John Bunyan (Swengel, Pa: Reiner, 1968), p.v.

<sup>9</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, p.123.

<sup>10</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface," p.125.

<sup>11</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface," p.125.

<sup>12</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface," p.127.

<sup>13</sup>Wordsworth, "Preface," p.123.

<sup>14</sup>Tindall, John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher, p.3.

<sup>15</sup>Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress, ed. James Blanton Wharey, rev. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p.4.

<sup>16</sup>Watkins, p.6.

<sup>17</sup>James, Varieties of Religious Experience, p.157.

<sup>18</sup>Watkins, p.110.

<sup>19</sup>James Sutherland, English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p.314-15.



Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>Hulme, p.118.



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